

Catherine Diamond@2015

## The Snakes

This is an adaptation of the Chinese classic tale, *The White Snake*, but the title has been changed because the play focuses on the relationship between the sisters, White and Green Snake. As goddesses of thunder and rain, they combat superstition and religious practices harmful to the natural environment.

### Characters

Grandfather

Yun, his granddaughter

Xuxian, a pharmacist

Suling, Xuxian's Sister

Bai Suzhen, the White Snake

Xiao Qing, the Green Snake,

Xiao Chan, a rival pharmacist

Fahai, the monk

Midwife

Townspeople: Fu, Jin, Lao

Boatman

Mayor Xia

Mrs. Ma

Mayor Xia's servant

## Act I

### Prologue

*(A bare mountain top. Grandfather and Yun are searching for something. They have been searching all day.)*

I'm tired, let's go back.

Grandfather

You rest here. I'll just look nearby.

Yun

I should never have told you.

Grandfather

You had to. It's my story too.

Yun

But I never meant for you to go on this wild goose chase. It'll be the death of me.

Grandfather

Yun

Oh, oh, look! (*she runs off stage and comes back*) Just another white root. They fool me each time. (*goes off*)

Grandfather

Don't go too far. It's getting dark. (*to himself*) Obsessed. I guess I was the same when I first heard of the two snake sisters, one white as cloud and the other green as bamboo....(*afraid, he looks up and calls*) Yun, where are you? Come back now. Yun? Yun!  
(*crack of thunder, two giant puppet snakes—in the style of Chinese lion dance—dance*)

### Scene I At the lakeside

Suzhen

These new fingers tingle, alive and fresh, but my tongue sits in my mouth like a dead lump. My muscles feel as sluggish as if I were coming out of a long sleep.

Qing

Look what long legs and arms! But we can't slip down a hole or glide up a tree anymore. We're clumsy brutes.

Suzhen

I suppose we're delicate...for humans.

Qing

Well, let's go find out what they think of us!

Suzhen

No...it's too dangerous.

Qing

What was the point of meditating so long if we aren't going to take this final test?

Suzhen

You know we only *look* human.

Qing

If they're so vicious why did we even want to become human?

Suzhen

Now that I am one I forget...

Qing

We wanted to understand why they hate us.

Suzhen

(*interrupts*) We wanted to be human because it was the highest form of mortal existence.

Qing

I never believed that. The only way to find out is to go live among them. That town across the lake looks like a good place to start. Let's go. (*she's about to jump in*)

Suzhen  
*(catches Qing by her clothes)* You can't just plunge in.

Qing  
 Oh, right. Damned inconvenient.

Suzhen  
*(to Boatman)* Boatman, we want to cross.

Boatman  
 This boat's already reserved.

Qing  
 Take us first and then come back.

Boatman  
 No!

Qing  
 Why you...

Suzhen  
 Qing, stop. Oh, it's beginning to rain.

Qing  
*(to Boatman)* Listen, if you take us across now, we'll pay double. If you don't, *(lowers her voice)* I'll squeeze the life out of you.

Suzhen  
 Please, it's raining so hard your passenger probably won't come.

Boatman  
 Here he comes now.

Xuxian  
*(enters)* What's wrong?

Boatman  
 These ladies want to cross.

Xuxian  
 Tell them to get in. Hurry, the storm is picking up.

Boatman  
*(to Qing)* You'll keep your word and pay me double?

Qing  
 Row, tortoise.

Xuxian  
You have no umbrella? (*he holds his umbrella over Suzhen*).

Suzhen  
Thank you.

Xuxian  
Take the ladies home first.

Qing  
Where do you live, sir?

Xuxian  
Not far from the Qian Tang Gate.

Qing  
(*pretends*) We live near there, too.

Xuxian  
Really? (*to Suzhen*) Then you must know my pharmacy. My name is Liang Xuxian.

Qing  
I am called Xiao Qing, and my sister is Bai Suzhen.

Suzhen  
Thank you for taking us across.

Xuxian  
Take the umbrella with you.

Qing  
(*Suzhen refuses but Qing takes it*) We'll return it to you tomorrow.

Xuxian  
Fine, no actually, I'd better come pick it up. Where did you say...

Qing  
We're on the corner of... Yu Sheng Road. (*Qing whispers to Suzhen*) There must be a Yu Sheng road...

**Black out.**

## **Scene 2 At Xuxian's pharmacy**

Suling  
Get up, lazy good for nothing. How many times do I have to tell you, the herbs have to be picked before dawn?

Xuxian  
(*he snuffles and sneezes with a cold*) I know, I know.

Suling

Brother, we have to work even harder now that Chan's son has returned. We're already losing customers to him.

Xuxian

Don't worry. Last night I had a dream about two beautiful goddesses, one in green silk, and the other in white. I'm sure it's a sign of good fortune.

Suling

You and your goddesses! I know what such dreams mean. Go, before Chan's assistants have plucked the mountain bare.

Xuxian

*(getting dressed)* Don't worry, they don't know where to pick the best herbs, and just mix the good and bad together.

Suling

So they sell cheaper. What can we do but follow?

Xuxian

Not as long as Dr. Ping still recommends us.

Suling

Dr. Ping is getting old and so are his patients. You have to be more enterprising. Go to the city and drum up more business. And we should look for your bride among the doctors' families.

Xuxian

Only if I can choose for myself.

Suling

I'm your father and mother, I raised you.

Xuxian

I'll think about it. First to the mountain.

***Black out.***

### **Scene 3 At the Snake Sisters' house**

Qing

*(playing cards)* I'm tired of waiting. Perhaps he isn't as eager as he seemed.

Suzhen

It was so embarrassing. I'm so used to people running away from me.

Qing

*(knocking)* Speak of the human!

!

Xuxian

Hello, I've just come...

Qing

To get your umbrella.

Suzhen

Why, you're all wet! Come in.

Xuxian

I've been up on the mountain picking herbs (*shows his sack*) and the storm caught me by surprise.

Qing

Show us what you've got. My sister and I are quite knowledgeable about herbs. (*he spreads them out; they study the herbs; he studies Suzhen*)

Suzhen

Yes, quite good quality, but there are better higher up...

Xuxian

I only go up to the very top of the mountain twice a year. It's too dangerous. There are landslides, and besides, it's covered in snow.

Suzhen

...I will go get tea.

Xuxian

(*whispers*) Are neither of you married?

Qing

No. Are you?

Xuxian

Not yet, but just this morning my elder sister was saying I must marry soon.

Qing

And what did you tell her?

Xuxian

That I would make my own choice.

Qing

It seems you already have.

Xuxian

Yes, Little Sister, you've guessed my mind. I love your beautiful sister, but am I, a poor pharmacist, worthy of her? An unknown man cannot just walk in and expect to be taken at face value.

Qing

Your face is not bad.

Xuxian

Hers is the loveliest I've ever seen. And she moves with some otherworldly grace, I can't quite explain.

Qing

Then it's best not to try.

Suzhen

*(enters)* Please accept some tea. So, is your business new or has your family run the pharmacy a long time?

Xuxian

The Liang family has been making medicine for four hundred years, but I'm afraid the business isn't prospering. The new twists and turns of business leave me like a...

Qing

A lobster in a boiling pot?

Xuxian

Not exactly.

Qing

But you are turning red.

Suzhen

Qing, let Mr. Liang speak.

Xuxian

I'm lucky to have the backing of the famous Dr. Ping who once saved the governor's life, but I can't rely on his loyalty forever and have to find a new strategy.

Qing

What are you going to do?

Xuxian

I don't know. People nowadays are so confused by misleading labels, and medicines 'doctored' with false ingredients. Our traditional medicine has become a new fad. Now with so many people growing rich, they're all clamoring for exotic cures.

Qing

Why? Are rich people more sick than before?

Xuxian

*(laughs and shakes his head)* The things people get into their heads. When they hear about some fashionable new disease, they suddenly have to have it too. They imitate the wealthy even in sickness. Rare animal parts are all the rage, and so profitable—bear bile, tiger bone, shark's fin, rhino horn, snake blood....

Suzhen

(*shivers*) How barbaric!

Qing

What do you do?

Xuxian

I've told my customers it's an illegal and cruel trade, but they just don't believe me. They think that when a rhino's horn or a shark's fin is cut off, the animal just grows another, like fingernails or hair. Well, you know how people think.

Qing

We do?

Suzhen

Tell us.

Xuxian

The rarer the animal, the higher the price; the higher the price, the more it's killed. It's a vicious circle by greedy businessmen...like my competitor, Chan.

Qing

(*whispers*) Truly, our minds are not human.

Xuxian

It's no longer about health at all! Only status! That's why I no longer stock animal parts.

Qing

You won't get rich.

Xuxian

With the growing trade in fake medicine, I might not be alive either.

Suzhen

Mr. Liang, my sister didn't mean to offend.

Xuxian

It's all right. My sister thinks the same. I'd better go. I didn't mean to bother you with my troubles. (*goes*)

Suzhen

Rarer than the rhino is the man who would endanger his livelihood for his self respect. Oh, he forgot his umbrella.

Qing

He didn't forget. I think we're going to have to save this noble pharmacist from his high-minded self. Well, sister, we're not two days into this human experiment. Are you ready to tie your fate to a man's?

Suzhen

It may have been fate that I met him, but not that I have fallen in love.

***Black out***



**Scene 4 In Xuxian's pharmacy**

Xuxian  
No, Mayor Xia, it will not help you.

Xia  
But I want rhino horn. I must please my new wife.

Xuxian  
It's now very expensive.

Xia  
I have the money

Xuxian  
But I have only a little horn left and it's used for bringing down fever. I'm sorry to disappoint you, but rhino horn is not an aphrodisiac.

Xia  
A what?

Xuxian  
An, uh, sex aid for men.

Xia  
Using foreign words now, are you? I've been coming to this pharmacy since my grandmother first brought me, but if you won't give me what I want, I'll go Chan's. (*exit*)

Suling  
(*enter*) What did he want?

Xuxian  
Rhino horn. He has a new wife.

Suling  
You didn't give it to him? What's wrong with you? He's the mayor, you fool. We can get more.

Xuxian  
Not legally.

Suling  
The price will only go up.

Xuxian  
I will not be responsible for the extinction of a noble beast. A rhino used to be a gift only for emperors. Now a billion people want a piece of it!

Suling

Noble beast! You might as well be a vet.

Xuxian

Western pills better and cheaper than rhino horn. When horn was all we had, we used it sparingly, now when it's disappearing people think it's the magic cure for everything.

Suling

People remember their mothers using it, and when they're sick they want their mothers. Xuxian, you're a good man, but you understand neither business nor psychology.

Suling

So everyone else will get rich on lies while we dig our graves with the truth. Brother, at a certain point integrity is just stubborn pride.

Xuxian

*(he looks up and sees himself in mirror)* I have the reputation of this family to uphold. I will not betray my own knowledge.

Suling

I know you think I'm old fashioned and small minded...

Xuxian

No, no....

Suling

And only think about profit, but it's not true. I too, care about our family name. Can't you see we have to change with the times?

Xuxian

Well, what do you suggest?

Suling

Go with Dr. Ping the next time he goes to the city. Learn the current practices...and find a wife.

***Black out.***

### **Scene 5 Snake Sisters' house**

Qing

*(Xuxian knocks on their door)* Well, neighbor, good to see you.

Xuxian

Is your sister at home?

Suzhen

*(enters)* Oh, Mr. Liang, do sit down.

Xuxian

I am planning a trip to city and...

Suzhen  
To the city!

Xuxian  
You seemed to think I was too old fashioned.

Suzhen  
Oh, I hope you didn't think...

Xuxian  
You were right. And since I'm planning a long journey, I wish to discuss....

Qing  
*(interrupts)* You've come to ask about whether pearl powder is good for dizziness?

Xuxian  
No, I...

Qing  
Or whether ginger root heals blistered feet?

Xuxian  
No, I...

Qing  
Or why these sesame cakes made by my sister are such a good stimulant that I can hear your heart pounding?

Xuxian  
No, I... *(realizes)* oh, ah, yes, they are delicious.

Suzhen  
*(to Qing)* Hush! How can you be so vulgar?

Xuxian  
*(laughing)* Suzhen, What I was going to say is that I want to marry you, but only if I also get the vulgar little sister.

Qing  
What! As your second wife?

Xuxian  
*(laughing)* No, no, as my... little sister.

Qing  
Aye, what a businessman! Suzhen, can you love such a man?

Xuxian  
I've told you of the problems I face, but with you at my side I know I can overcome them. Ever since we met, I've thought of you as my... destiny. I wonder if you feel the same about me.

Suzhen  
Yes. Perhaps in an earlier life, we met, fell in love, and...

Qing  
And?

Suzhen  
I don't know. I guess it's just a matter of faith.

Xuxian  
In me?

Suzhen  
Uh, well, yes, but I meant...in myself.

Xuxian  
Then you will marry me?

Suzhen  
You don't know who you are marrying.

Qing  
(*aside*) Indeed!

Xuxian  
As you say, it's a matter of faith.

Suzhen  
Yes, and without it, we die.

Xuxian  
Oh! Suzhen, I love You! Good. Then it's all settled. In three days, I'll come to take you home

Qing  
Now all you have to do is persuade *your* sister.

Xuxian  
I'll take care of that.

***Black out***

### **Scene 6 At Xuxian's pharmacy**

Suling  
(*slaps him*) How dare you! I won't let you marry an uncivilized woman from the mountains. Have you lost your mind?

Xuxian  
Curb your anger at my not consulting you. You'll see I've made my decision to help our family.

Suling

I won't look at her or speak to her.

Xuxian

You'll treat her courteously. I'm going to get her and her sister now. *(leaves)*

Suling

*(shouts after him)* Sister? You never told me about any sister! *(mutters to herself)*

A house of three women and one foolish boy! Nothing could be worse. Chan's son has been looking at me with a certain gleam in his eye. If Xuxian's mountain fairy gets any ideas about taking over the shop, at least Xiao Chan offers me another chance. Aye, what is a woman? I spend my life raising the no-good boy and now he marries a no-good woman.

Xuxian

Sister, meet Bai Suzhen and her sister, Xiao Qing. *(they kneel and bow to her)* They bring gifts of silk, cash, and rare herbs.

Suzhen

Dear Sister, thank you for welcoming us into your house. We'll serve you to the best of our poor ability.

Qing

Dear Sister, we'll assist you in any way possible.

Suling

*(softened by their humility)* Well Brother, go to the market to buy something for the wedding dinner.

Suzhen

We've brought cooked food with us. Please let us prepare the meal.

Suling

Very well. *(they prepare the food and sit down to eat)* What's this? Duck? It smells very good. And this? Ah, the fish looks done to perfection.

Xuxian

*(whispers)* My sister loves a good meal.

Suzhen

*(smiles)* Who doesn't?

Suling

You used medicinal herbs to flavor the dishes., I must say, they're quite delicious.

Suzhen

I'd like to start an herb garden in back of the shop.

Xuxian

Good idea. Really good idea! It will cut down on costs.

Suling

I always said we should have an herb garden.

Qing

And I'm happy to help gather herbs on the mountain.

Xuxian

You see, Sister. You won't have to go

Suling

She'll have to learn what to pick first. I might not be a cook, but I'm the daughter of Liang and know how to make the best medicine. Now, once you get to the city, try to drum up business among the wealthy merchants. if only you could discover some new disease ...

Xuxian

I won't start making up fake diseases or raising false hope.

Suzhen

But there's nothing wrong with doing a little experimentation.

Suling

My meaning exactly. (*sighs*) You just don't know how to keep up with the times.

Xuxian

In these times of constant change, people appreciate stability and reliability. And now that I'm a married man, that reputation is even more important to maintain.

## Act II

### Scene 1 On the Mountain near Fahai's hermitage

Suling

(*picking herbs*) There, that's enough. Always pick only the freshest leaves. And never go over there. It's monk Fahai's hermitage.

Qing

Who?

Suling

Our holy man. Never disturb him. Watch out, there's an excellent fungus right by your foot.

Qing

My foot? Oh, yes. He never comes down off the mountain?

Suling

Only twice a year. With Fahai up here meditating and chanting from morning till night, we in the town are safe. No, that leaf's got yellow edges. Well, you certainly pick faster than Xuxian. He dawdles over everything. I thought he'd never leave. Come, we have enough now.

Qing

He wasn't eager to go.

Suling

Quite! So in love in with your sister he was even more absent-minded. Not even getting out of bed till noon.

Qing

They were both happy.

Suling

Too happy, and with less sense than ever. Now he won't have much time in the city before the rainy season starts. Then the roads will be too muddy to travel. *(they enter shop)*

### **Scene Two At Xuxian's pharmacy**

Suzhen

Good morning, give me the herbs. I'll dry them out while you eat. *(Mrs. Ma enters)*

Suling

Hello Mrs. Ma, have you eaten?

Ma

Where's your brother?

Suling

He's gone with Dr. Ping to the city to learn about all the latest diseases.

Ma

Well, I hope they don't bring any back.

Suling

*(laughing)* Excellent joke, Mrs. Ma!

Ma

Who's going to look after us if they're both gone?

Suling

No need to worry. I am as good at making medicines as my brother. Now, how can I help you?

Ma

My son caught a fever yesterday. He cries out saying his joints are on fire.

Suling

Oh dear! It's too early for dengue. Any rash?

Ma

No. Sometimes I think he just gets sick to have me look after him. But what can I do?

Suling

You're right. It's best not to take chances. I'll make this *Yin Qiao San Jia Jian* for you. Make sure you boil it the full four hours and that he drinks it all.

Ma

Even he knows the worse it tastes the better it works.

Suling

*(laughs)* Ah, your sense of humor never gets sick! *(exit in)*

Suzhen

*(coming out, calling)* Mrs. Ma, four hours is a long time to be with fever. Soak these leaves in vinegar and crush them to put on his forehead and chest. They should comfort him till the medicine is ready.

Ma

I don't have any more money.

Suzhen

My gift.

Ma

Then, thank you. *(goes out. Qing enters.)*

Suzhen

I'm glad our coming into the household has gone so smoothly. I was worried Xuxian's sister would cause trouble after he left. She's easily tamed with a good meal.

Qing

I don't trust her. When I go with her to collect herbs, she criticizes me the whole time.

Suzhen

Be careful! Don't make her nervous.

Qing

It's not fair! I don't like being stuck here as a servant—this is not what we, what I, meditated a thousand years for. You've got what you wanted, but I still need to search.

Suzhen

I know. But we have to be patient. Qing, I'm pregnant.

Qing

Already? You don't seem very nervous.

Suzhen

Of course, I am. As all first time mothers are.

Qing

Hasn't it occurred to you that you might give birth to a snake...or worse?



Suzhen

No, I have faith in dominant genes—two legs, two arms, black hair, dark eyes, and ...

Qing

A fat tongue. (*shudders*) But don't worry. I'll look after you though I long to stay on the mountain.

Suzhen

You're free to roam as you like, but don't stay out after dark, or Sister-in-law will suspect you're seeing a man!

**Black out.**

### Scene 3 At Fahai's hermitage

Fahai

(*Qing is picking herbs on the mountain and accidentally disturbs Fahai. He looks up, startled from his meditation*) What are you doing here?

Qing

Oh, I'm sorry. I'm picking herbs and didn't mean to disturb you, but I was so distracted....

Fahai

Why?

Qing

So many strange animals on the mountain that don't belong here. They're frightened and confused. Rabbits, sparrows with clipped wings; carp by the dozens, and red-eared slider turtles from America and....

Fahai

They've been released for The Buddha's birthday. The best time for earning merit.

Qing

Yes, but surely not the best way. Most of these creatures will starve to death. Those that survive will be a danger to the native animals. I've heard you protect the mountain—you could persuade people not to do this.

Fahai

Do not presume to teach me my responsibilities. People need a way to demonstrate charity and compassion.

Qing

Acts of charity and compassion should be informed and thoughtful.

Fahai

Do not presume to teach me the sutras. Many people make their living by selling the animals for release.

Qing

Yes, a profitable business. But hardly merciful. The Buddha would not be pleased.

Fahai

Do not presume to understand The Buddha's mind.

Qing

No, I won't. I will quietly let him know mine. (*goes*)

Fahai

Twenty years I've lived in peace on the mountain, and now suddenly she appears and captures my heart. (*he sits in 'earth-touching' mudra, closes his eyes*) I close my eyes, but still only see her face. She criticized me, but if I speak out now against the animal release, she'll think I do it for her. I will not be trapped by her beauty. In this case, right action is 'no action'; the ideal form is 'no form.' Ordinary people need forms. Only the highest beings like me know how to show charity and compassion in secret and without self-congratulation.

**Black out.**

#### **Scene 4 In Xuxian's pharmacy**

Chan

(*enters*) Good morning, Miss Liang!

Suling

Xiao Chan! To what do I owe this unusual honor? Have you run out of an ingredient and come to pay a high price for some of ours?

Chan

(*laughs*) No, but if that ever happened, here is exactly where I'd come....Everything looks the same.

Suling

Why of course.

Chan

I expected some change. (*sniffs*) Smells good. I keep hearing stories about how wonderful your cures are, and curiosity got the better of me. Your brother is still in the city?

Suling

Oh yes, I'm not sure when to expect him back.

Chan

Then you're the better doctor. You've magically cured Mr. Chao of his gout. Mrs. Fu's arthritis that always acts up this time of year has disappeared, and old mother Ma goes about with a smile boasting of her son's strength. You certainly know how to make your customers happy. I don't see any dried sharks' fin or birds' nest on your shelves. Your jars of cicada husks and seahorses are empty too. A pretty woman's smile works more wonders than I imagined.

Suling

What a charming thing to say, Xiao Chan; but you know I'm older than you and should be shown more respect.

Chan

Only by a year. I spent five years studying in the city and I return to find you unchanged. I suspect you've discovered the Elixir of Eternal Youth and are making it in the back of your shop.

Suling

Ah, if only that were true. The long hours of plucking herbs in raw weather have aged me quickly.

Chan

Not at all. Your cheeks are plump and your eyes bright. You're the best advertisement for your shop.

Suling

Now you're getting carried away. Have you come for any other reason than to make me blush?

Chan

Yes, I want to take advantage of your brother's absence to talk to you privately.

Suling

I see. *(she pours tea)*

Chan

We have been in unfriendly competition recently.

Suling

Ever since you came back with so many new ideas, you've sparked everyone's desire to be up-to-date.

Chan

Xuxian is now off trying to do the same. But many of my ideas I haven't been able to implement. As my father grows older; he's increasingly stubborn and just doesn't understand the new ways of doing business.

Suling

My brother suffers the same disease.

Chan

Well, that's why I've come. You and I think alike...and are unmarried.

Suling

I don't quite understand...

Chan

I think you do. If we marry and merge our businesses, we can capture the entire market. We're foolish to be working so hard and scraping by with so little when the opportunities to expand are so good.

Suling

*(sighs)* How many nights I've lain awake thinking the same. I've tried to persuade Xuxian.

Chan

Then you and I...

Suling

You and I...*(hears rustling in the back and pulls away)*

Suzhen

*(comes in with snacks)* I heard the tea cups rattle and assumed a guest had come. Mr. Chan, what a pleasure to see you. Your father is well?

Chan

Yes, and yourself? It must be difficult to have your husband away so soon after your marriage. *(he eats)*

Suzhen

Of course I miss him. But we're kept busy.

Chan

Now I must go. If there's any way I can assist you in his absence, please do not hesitate to call. Good day. *(exits)*

Suzhen

That was very decent of him.

Suling

No, I don't trust him. I'd be happy if Xuxian did not know about this visit right away. It would give me a little time to find out what Xiao Chan is really up to. He laughed when he saw that Xuxian won't sell any more animal parts, not even seahorses.

Suzhen

I'm glad he doesn't after he told me they're disappearing. If one of a pair dies, the other won't mate again. I think poems should be written about seahorse fidelity.

Suling

Men like to eat them for virility, and you can never stock enough for that.

Suzhen

*(puzzled)* But it's the male that carries the eggs.

Suling

What? The males get pregnant? *(they laugh)* Ah, my soft-hearted soft-brained brother. Next, he'll be saying we can't eat pork because the pig protests. *(exit)*

Qing

(*enters*) Suzhen, look what I've found.

Suzhen

What is it?

Qing

Don't you recognize it? A pangolin, sweet shy little anteater. I rescued it from a trap. Poachers are setting them all over the mountain.

Suzhen

But why?

Qing

Chan is selling the scales as 'good for the heart.' A little sympathy would be better for peoples' hearts. Oh, the more I learn about humans, the more I respect snakes.

Suzhen

What are you going to do with it?

Qing

Keep it in the herb garden—it eats only ants. Don't tell Sister-in-law. She'll want you to cook it up.

***Black out.***

### **Scene 5 In Xuxian's pharmacy**

Suling

(*holding letter*) This is just like him. I told Xuxian to get back before the rainy season and now he's delayed so long he'll have to wait till after the Ghost month. Stupid boy! And he must have forgotten that next Tuesday is Mulian's festival.

Suzhen

I'm sure he's not forgotten. Something important must have detained him.

Suling

If you had told him you were pregnant he would have returned fast enough.

Suzhen

I thought it best not to distract him from business.

Suling

Business! The word isn't in his vocabulary. Our father was just like him, the beloved doctor treating people for free. If it hadn't been for our mother's careful management, we would have starved. He got all the acclaim and she was ridiculed for her penny-pinching.

Suzhen

Xuxian knows he'd be lost without you. Tell me what we must do for the festival.

Suling

First we must help sweep and cleanse the temples. And then bring cooked offerings.

Suzhen

And offerings outside the house?

Suling

Of course. I'll burn the paper money. I also invite Fahai to chant the *Yu lan ban* at the family shrine. You must make a good impression on him. And perhaps, it's best to keep your sister out of sight. Her sharp tongue might offend him.

Suzhen

I'll send her up the mountain.

Suling

But make sure she's back before dark. She'd be great temptation for a hungry ghost. (*goes*)

Qing

(*enters*) The town is buzzing. What's going on?

Suzhen

Ghost Month and preparation for Mulian's festival.

Qing

Ah, I've seen those ugly Hungry Ghosts hovering around. Long skinny necks and bulging bellies they look like...like a snake that's just eaten a rat. (*giggles*) But why are they showing up now?

Suzhen

Remember Mulian had to rescue his mother from Hell after she kept the money he had given her to donate to the monks. Because of her greed, he had to make food offerings to appease her Hungry Ghost and then persuade The Buddha to allow her a human rebirth. Greedy mother, dutiful son.

Qing

More like greedy monks! I bet Sister-in-law is making a fat red envelope so she can be greedy the rest of the year.

Suzhen

Shush! She's right to worry about you not controlling your tongue when Fahai comes.

Qing

Oh, so he's visiting us too?

Suzhen

Be good, do you hear!

Qing

Even better, I'll be absent. I'll go to the Nu Wa shrine on top of the mountain. Nobody goes up there anymore. People think we snakes are cruel, but they set up ceremonies to hide their cruelty from themselves. Nothing but hypocrisy! (*exit*)

Suzhen

*(goes to family altar and lights incense)* Merciful Kwan Yin, protect my husband from all harm. Lord Buddha, comfort me. Revered mother and father of Xuxian, in all ways, I will serve you till the end of my humble life.

**Black out**

### Scene 6 In Xuxian's pharmacy

Suling

*(Suzhen is chopping vegetables)* Fahai should be coming soon. *(looks out)* Amitofo!

Suzhen

What?

Suling

He's here already!

Suzhen

Calm yourself. Everything is ready. *(Fahai enters with monks, women bow)*

Suling

Thank you, holy one, for your blessings. Though we only heal the rude body while you liberate the soul, we both devote ourselves to ease the suffering in this life.

Fahai

I know your brother is the best pharmacist in town, but this year reports of his cures have been...astonishing. Where is he?

Suling

My foolish brother went to the city with Dr. Ping.

Fahai

Too bad. I'll miss our chat and game of chess, but I'll chant an extra prayer for his safe return. *(Suzhen looks up in thanks, he stares at her)* Who is this woman?

Suling

My foolish brother's wife. I was against the marriage, but she has proved useful in the kitchen and knows herbs.

Fahai

Ah, now I understand. That explains the miraculous cures. I advise you not to experiment with supernatural knowledge. People might be happy at first, but if something goes wrong, their suspicions and anger will know no bounds.

Suling

I have often said the same thing, but my foolish brother is always eager to keep up with new fashions. *(Suling gives him a red envelope)*

Suzhen

*(offering food)* Please take some refreshment before you go.

Fahai

*(ignores her)* Tell your brother that I look forward to hearing about his travels the next time I come. Perhaps it will be sooner than we expect. *(Fahai goes)*

Suling

Well, that didn't go too badly! You look pale.

Suzhen

I'm a bit dizzy.

Suling

Well, lie down. I'm starving. *(exit)*

Suzhen

*(alone)* Oh Xuxian! That monk looked right through me. Oh, he knows! He knows about me! What's going to happen now? Perhaps he won't come down again until after the child is born. Then I'd feel safe. He could say nothing if you're holding your own son in your arms. But what were his last words—warning me that he might come down sooner? Xuxian, hurry back. Tell me you love me whatever happens.

***Black out***

**Scene 7 At Xuxian's pharmacy. All sitting around the dining table.**

Xuxian

*(laughing)* I walked so fast Dr. Ping could barely keep up with me, but the journey seemed endless.

Suling

The city! Tell us about the city. What medicines? What diseases?

Xuxian

Cancer is the big one everyone talks about, and AIDS, the big one no one does.

Suling

We're lucky not to have that ugly business here.

Xuxian

*(knowing they do)* Ah, yes. Well, aside from having trouble breathing the polluted air, the old people are in pretty good shape; it's the young people that have me worried.

Suzhen

Why? All the little princes and princesses have got the best of everything.

Xuxian

Quite. Spoiled all their lives, they think they're not smart enough, rich enough, tall enough, white enough, big-eyed enough. Plastic surgery is the booming business.

Suling

Not much call for that here. Remember Granny Su who wanted to look young and dyed her hair black. When her grandson saw her, he cried and wouldn't let her hold him! *(laughter)*



Xuxian

Men are changing their appearance as much as women. They have to impress the employers to get the job...

Suling

To get the money....

Suzhen

To get the girl.

Qing

To get the son.

Xuxian

The saddest story I heard was of a young man so desperate, he had an operation to break his legs and insert a two-inch segment into the bone.

Suling

Not so sad if he gets a good job.

Qing

And as long as he never wants to walk again. Vertical is not always beautiful.

Xuxian

Now, the reason why I'm so late is that Dr. Ping and I arranged to sell some of our pure mountain herbs under a new label. A premium quality brand that will be sold to a few doctors in the city and then exported abroad.

Suling

Oh Brother! Finally you've done something smart.

Xuxian

*(shows them the boxes and bottles)*. What do you think of the design?

Suzhen

It's beautiful. Look Qing, it's our mountain!

Xuxian

*(aside to Suling)* I don't want Suzhen to work so much.

Suling

Don't worry, I'll take good care of her. I'm glad the next generation is on the way. That's how it should be. *(she looks downcast)*

Xuxian

I know it's hard for you.

Suling

I've already called in the midwife to make the pregnancy food.

Xuxian

That won't be necessary. Suzhen still wants to cook. She knows what she needs.  
(*midwife enters*)

Suling

But here she is.

Midwife

(*to Suling*) Much too thin. (*to Qing*) Much too pale, almost greenish. (*to Suzhen*) Don't rub your stomach, it makes for a spoiled child.

Xuxian

Nonsense.

Midwife

Let me look. Yes, it's a little bit pointed. I'm sure it's a boy.

Xuxian

More nonsense.

Midwife

No meat for you till after its born.

Xuxian

Most nonsense!

Midwife

Do you forget? Tofu, mushrooms, carrots and lettuce for a male child; pickles, meat and fish for a female.

Xuxian

Superstitious rubbish! Poor peasants had so little meat they had to hope the lack of it would give them a male heir. Our job is to make sure the mother is healthy and comfortable.  
(*quarrels with Midwife*)

Suzhen

Please don't quarrel. Right now no food appeals to me.  
**Black out**

### **Scene 8 In Chan's pharmacy, a farce with shadow puppets**

Xiao Chan

Mr. Fu, still having trouble reading? Even with more light? I'll give you the best medicine there is. How do I know? Listen, what animal has the best eyesight in the dark? Right, owls. Luckily, I've just purchased this rare barred owl. You boil it with these herbs, eat the flesh and drink the broth. Keep those soft inner feathers. Rubbing them on the skin will make it soft and supple. A special gift for your daughter-in-law.

Ah, Little Gao, that's an ugly boil on your back. Too much carrying, you say? Here is a patch of tapir skin to place on it. Tapir, yes that big fat animal from the South. Its fat and skin is very effective. Come back in three days, and I'll put on a new patch.

All right, you two boys, by your giggling I can guess what you want. But you're too young for that sort of thing. What! Stimulant *and* protection? Here's something effective and cheap. No, I'm not insulting you, I used dog penis myself when I was in the army. What? You want sea cucumber? It's very expensive. And wasted on such strong boys. Well, you're sure to have a good time.

Mr. Lee, you're looking very hearty. How old are you now? Ninety-three, and still going strong. Tell these good people your secret. Every week a bowl of turtle's blood? You are the living proof of our medicine's effectiveness. .

Well, Farmer Jin snake is good...no, not just for sex, but as a general tonic. Snake bile, snake blood, snake pickled in wine are all known for their strengthening properties. Now here is an excellent pit viper... (*end of puppet show*)

Suling

(*eavesdropping at Chan's house—watching the puppets—is surprised to see Qing*)

Qing

Is Young Chan is experimenting with new recipes? Anything that we might find useful?

Suling

He was just recommending snake liquor.

Qing

I guess snakes have an obvious appeal for some men....

Suling

Oh, not just for men. Since they shed the old skin for a clean beautiful new one, the skin is very good for all kinds of skin ailments.

Qing

I see. If I ate the skin, would it give me a good complexion?

Suling

You certainly don't need it. Your skin is perfect. Do you have any secret?

Qing

Sleep. Lots of sleep.

Suling

Well, come along, Sleeping Beauty, enough of your foolishness.

***Black out.***

## Act III

### Scene 1 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Xuxian

It's good to see you smiling and the color back in your cheeks. You were so pale, you frightened me.

Suzhen

So many things could have...happened.

Xuxian

I was scared too. But now we've celebrated the boy's first month and he's the healthiest baby I've ever seen. We can relax and be happy.

Suzhen

I am, but you spent an awful lot of money on the celebration.

Xuxian

Our new medicines are doing very well! They passed inspection for export. Last week, our first shipment sold out and new orders are pouring in.

Suzhen

You sly fellow! Keeping this all secret from me.

Xuxian

No regrets that you married this shy clumsy boy?

Suzhen

I only hope our son has the same lovable qualities. By the way, where is he?

Xuxian

With my sister. She seems to have forgotten her own unhappiness. She was once engaged when our parents were still alive, and the boy died in an accident. Everyone took it as an ill omen and no family ever dared to make her another offer.

Suzhen

I'm glad the child makes her happy.

Xuxian

The only one who still seems restless is Qing. We should look for a husband for her.

Suzhen

Uh, no. I don't think so.

Xuxian

*(Ma enters shop)* Good morning, Mrs. Ma, what is...?

Ma

Come quickly. My boy has been vomiting for two days.

Xuxian

Why didn't you come earlier?

Ma

He complains so much I usually wait to see if it's serious, but this time he tried to hide it from me. He's scared.

Xuxian

Scared of my medicines no doubt.

Ma

He coughs, has trouble breathing.

Xuxian

*(calls out)* Suling! *(Suling enters and he whispers)* I'm going to go see him, but I'm sure I'll be back soon. *(leaves)*

Suzhen

Here comes Mayor Xia. He looks worried, too. *(Xia enters)*

Suling

Mayor Xia, I hope your family is...

Xia

My father is unwell. Where is Xuxian?

Suling

He just went to Mrs. Ma house. We're entering the cold season now. You have to keep the elderly warm and comfortable. They feel the cold more.

Xia

I've already given him 'fragrant meat' soup. He's wheezing...like this.

Suling

Have you consulted Dr. Ping?

Xia

He says it's pneumonia. Here's the prescription.

Suling

Ah, then I can prepare it for you. *(whispers)* Suzhen, is there anything extra I should add?

Suzhen

Well, perhaps a little dryopteris *(guanzhong)* and a gram of Isatis leaf *(daqingye)*.

Suling

There you go.

Suzhen

Make sure those taking care of him wash their hands frequently...

Xia

Yes, yes, all right. But do you have any shark's fin? It's still good medicine. No? Then I'll have to go to Chan's. (*exit*)

Suling

We've treated his family for so long and now he has no loyalty.

Suzhen

Shark's fin will do no good for pneumonia.

Suling

Good morning, Mrs. Gao. We're having quite a busy morning.

Gao

My father isn't well. He was over at Mayor Xia's house playing cards with Old Xia, and now both old men are ill.

Suling

They're both heavy smokers.

Gao

My father smokes for health, but he doesn't feel like it now. He's short of breath, and has a high fever.

Suling

Fever? The cold months are cruel to the elderly. There you go, Mrs. Gao, for the fever.

Gao

I don't know what he'd do if *I* got ill. I'm the only one who has the patience to look after the bad tempered old fellow. (*exits*)

**Black out** (*sounds of many sick people groaning in pain*)

## Scene 2 At Xuxian's pharmacy

Suzhen

(*Xuxian enters*) You look exhausted...again.

Xuxian

I know.

Suzhen

What's going on?

Xuxian

I don't know.

Suling

This week we're even busier than last.

Xuxian

Something's wrong. Something new. More and more households have sick members. Today I reported to Mayor Xia, and he said, 'Just a seasonal indisposition,' and dismissed me. Then I find out he's making his report to the county. It can't show anything is wrong or he'll lose his job.

Suling

Everyone will find out sooner or later.

Xuxian

I've never seen anything like it. (*looks out*)

Servant

Come, Old Xia's nurse has died.

Xuxian

How did it happen?

Servant

She started coughing and got a fever just like Old Xia. Then she stopped breathing. Now no one will go into the old man's room.

Xuxian

Go tell Mayor Xia I'll be right there. And don't tell anyone what's happened. Do you understand? No one!

Suling

Brother, don't go.

Xuxian

We've got to get this under control; people are beginning to panic.

Suling

It's too dangerous. If you get sick...

Xuxian

I won't come back here and infect you.

Suzhen

How will we be able to take care of you?

Xuxian

You won't. No one must get near the baby but you, Suzhen. This new disease is too contagious. If people come who are still healthy, recommend *banlan* root to strengthen the immune system. And give them gauze. (*goes*)

Suling

Give?

Suzhen

I'll sew it into masks and then you can sell them. (*Qing enters*)

Suling

Good idea. Qing, take over the shop for a while. (*goes*)

Suzhen

Oh dear, what's she up to now?

Qing

You don't know? She's been carrying on with Chan's son.

Suzhen

(*laughs*) Ah, that's why she's been looking so content. I thought she was just happy because of the baby. Clearly, she is thinking about her own.

Qing

I don't see why you laugh. If her intentions were good, she would have told Xuxian. Xiao Chan thinks he's tricking her to find out our secrets, and she thinks she's tricking him into marrying her.

Qing

(*sees crowd of angry women approach*) Suzhen, go back inside. Ladies, what can I do for you?

Lao

You can tell us what's going on! Three people have died.

Qing

I don't know any more than you. We are cautioning everyone to stay warm, wear masks, and wash your hands...with soap.

Lao

Don't treat us like children.

Fu

We want to know how this sickness came. How long it will stay? How do we avoid it? What's the cure?

Qing

Ah, here comes Xuxian now. (*Xuxian enters and Qing disappears inside*)

Xuxian

Ladies, there's nothing to be worried about. Dr. Ping has just received instructions from the capital. It is best to avoid public places. Stay warm, serve nourishing food, and...

Jin

...wash hands.

Xuxian

Yes, that's very important. The virus can be transferred by dirty hands.



Fu

Can't you give us antibiotics?

Xuxian

No, it's a virus. Antibiotics are only good for bacterial infection.

Jin

Well, give us something for virus.

Xuxian

We can sell you a packet of the Jade Screen formula. It's not a guarantee against the virus, but it strengthens the immune system. *(they go)*

Suzhen

I'm not sure you reassured them. They think you and all the officials are hiding something.

Xuxian

That's the problem with saying an honest, 'I don't know.'

Suzhen

They didn't shut the door.

Xuxian

They're afraid to touch it.

Suzhen

Will many die?

Xuxian

The weaker ones. The stronger will survive but their lungs might be permanently damaged. *(calling)* Suzhen, how is the boy?

Suzhen

*(off stage)* Sleeping peacefully in Qing's arms.

Xuxian

Take him away!

Suzhen

But....

Xuxian

Who knows who she's come in contact with. Qing, come out now! *(enter Qing)*

Qing

What's wrong? My sister needs some relief.

Xuxian

No one but Suzhen touches the baby, not even me.

Qing

Is there really nothing we can do?

Xuxian

You can start making up the Jade Screen formula. Fortunately, only we have all the twelve herbs needed for it from Suzhen's garden. I think Xiao Chan's stockpiling of animal parts is going to backfire.

Suling

Why?

Xuxian

When people learn that the virus started in the southern animal markets they won't want to have anything to do with animals.

Qing

I've never understood why those horrible markets are so popular.

Xuxian

Because quacks like Xiao Chan say they're needed for medicines.

Suling

People have short memories. Once the disease is passed, they'll be demanding animals again.

Qing

At least the sick are being looked after. I've heard that in the cities, hospitals have closed their doors; doctors have run away.

Xuxian

Trust! It's the first thing to go when people are scared. Fahai is the only person everyone trusts. I have to ask him to come.

Servant

*(rushes in)* Old Xia, the Mayor's father, has died.

Xuxian

I'll come immediately.

Servant

No, the mayor has ordered every house that has a sick person to be quarantined. He's closed the whole town to outsiders. Until the disease has been contained, no one can go in or out. Especially you.

Xuxian

But no one is sick here, and I must treat the fever.

Servant

The Mayor said no. He said... *(hesitates)*

Xuxian

Yes? What?

Servant

That you brought the disease from the city to improve your business. Promote your own brand. You started it, and your foreign wife and her sister helped to spread it. He holds you responsible for his father's death.

Suling

*(cries)* It's not true.

Xuxian

I don't blame him. Tell Mayor Xia, he has my deepest condolences, and to make sure that he himself avoids all risk of infection. *(servant exits)*

Suling

We're done for. He'll be our enemy forever.

Qing

You mean, for as long as he lives.

Xuxian

Enough!

Suzhen

*(calls from inside)* Dinner's ready.

Xuxian

You go in. *(alone)* When small pox used to attack, everyone wanted me to blow a 'magic powder' up the children's nostrils to protect them. When the parents learned it was actually powdered smallpox scabs, they wanted to kill me. But this time I have no magic and no science.

Suzhen

Here's some soup. You have to keep up your strength.

Xuxian

Oh Suzhen, you're my pillar of strength. I don't know what I'd do without you.

Suzhen

What are you talking about? We're together forever.

Xuxian

Sorry. My thoughts are morbid because of this disease.

Suzhen

At least our family is well-provided for.

Xuxian

Unfortunately, my dear, Dr. Ping has brought me other bad news. Some of our new products are defective.

Suzhen

That can't be true.

Xuxian

I know. He brought me a sample. It was filled with impurities. Then I inspected the box. It looks like ours, but the label printing was slightly defective.

Suzhen

A fake!

Xuxian

Yes, proof of our success! Only close inspection will reveal the difference between ours and the imitations. And now everyone will suspect us.

Suzhen

Then the only thing we can do is to shut it down completely.

Xuxian

Yes, but we'll never be able to regain our credibility. And it's my fault.

Suzhen

Don't blame yourself for others' evil. Go to bed, my love. We'll find a way out, but not tonight.

Xuxian

You're right. The morning may bring a little clarity. *(sleeps on bench)*  
**Black out**

### **Scene 3 At Xuxian's pharmacy**

*(a knocking in the dark)*

Xuxian

What! Another death? *(lights a candle)* Fahai! You know the whole town is quarantined?

Fahai

Yes, I smelled death even up on the mountain.

Xuxian

Are you ill?

Fahai

No.

Xuxian

This is a new threat. I don't know how to control it. I'm glad you've come.

Fahai

The sickness might be new, but its cause is old.

Xuxian

People take too many medicines. It weakens the body's *chi*. Dr Ping agrees with me, but Chan will never say anything that might hurt his profits.

Fahai

My business here concerns neither Ping nor Chan.

Xuxian

The virus started in the wild animal markets and jumped to humans.

Fahai

Indeed, it comes from inappropriate relations with animals.

Xuxian

I'm glad you agree with me. People were beginning to think I was to blame!

Fahai

You are to blame.

Xuxian

You mean, I've helped spread it? I wear a mask and wash my hands every time I enter and leave a house.

Fahai

Your pollution is deeper.

Xuxian

Fahai, we're old friends; be careful what you say.

Fahai

You know only the most extreme emergency would bring me here. I come not to save the town, but you, my friend. You're in mortal danger. The one you've married is not a woman but a snake.

Xuxian

Oh Fahai, you must have a bit of the fever yourself. Perhaps being alone up there too long has rattled your brain. My wife Suzhen has just given birth to a healthy human boy. No snake, could do that.

Fahai

This isn't the time for jokes. Your union not only endangers you, its immorality has brought this sickness.

Xuxian

Wait a minute—you're saying my marriage caused the disease?

Fahai

It's my duty to help you. You must cast off the snake.

Xuxian

I won't. Men made up that 'woman as snake' story when they got tired of their lovers and wanted a convenient way to get rid of them. Suzhen is the mother of my child and innocent of any crime. My old friend, I begin to suspect you're jealous. You saw she was kind and beautiful, and knew our friendship would be affected.

Fahai

I saw she wasn't what she pretended to be. And she knew I knew. Don't take my word for it. Find out for yourself. (*hands him bottle*)

Xuxian

(*laughs*) Hah! So that I'll hallucinate like you? See trees sprout wings and hear the flowers sing. The house cat becomes a tiger, and my beloved wife opens her mouth and a forked tongue wriggles between her lips. No, I won't take your potion, and I won't swallow your lies. I'll call her out now and you tell her to her face. Suzhen!

Suzhen

(*calls*) Xuxian, are you hungry?

Xuxian

Come, monk, eat with us. Share the rice of someone you unjustly accuse.

Fahai

No, I'll return to the mountain. I'd hoped to do some good. I didn't realize your stubbornness would close your mind to reason.

Xuxian

Reason? What proof have you given me? Take a potion, you say. No, you prove my love a snake...without this. You forget, monk, I'm a pharmacist; I know what some herbs can do to the mind.

Fahai

The Xuxian I knew would never talk to me like this.

Xuxian

Whatever happens, from now on, our friendship is at an end. Go! (*alone*) He wants me to be suspicious because Suzhen is too perfect. She's healed so many people. And now this virus plays right into his hands. He can blame her, a stranger. I should break this bottle. No, I'll prove him wrong. I'll love her even if she is a snake. (*heats the liquid*)

Suzhen

(*enters*) I've never been so cold.

Xuxian

I've heated some new wine. Here, it'll warm us up.

Suzhen

Wine? It tastes odd. I feel its heat go all the way through me. Goodnight, my love.

Xuxian

Good-night, sweet and gentle...wife. Oh, my head's on fire! Everything's moving. Suzhen, are you awake? (*in the dark, holding candle*) No, asleep. She stretches her body, her arm comes out, no, it's not an arm. Her foot comes out, no, not a foot but a scaly tail. Oh, horror...But is it true? Has Fahai's drug made me hallucinate or has she really changed her shape? I can't tell, is it me or her?

Fahai's Voice

First, the tail, and then the head, too, will be a snake's. Will you be able to share a pillow with that?

Xuxian

If she has the power to hide her true form, I have the self-control not to ask about it.

Fahai's Voice

Too late for that. Not today, maybe not tomorrow, but eventually she'll attack you.

Xuxian

No! She loves me.

Fahai's Voice

She must return to her true nature. Her humanity is only a temporary disguise. You must leave her to survive.

Xuxian

I don't want to survive without her.

Fahai's Voice

Don't talk nonsense. Come to the hermitage to clear your mind. (*Xuxian rushes out*)  
**Black out.**

#### **Scene 4 At Xuxian's pharmacy**

Suling

There've been no new cases for over a week. The quarantine's been lifted. Do you think Xuxian went to the city to save our product line?

Suzhen

He would have sent a message.

Suling

The last time you saw him, he...?

Suzhen

He had just learned about the fakes.

Suling

That's why I think he must be doing something about them. He wants to keep the whole business as quiet as possible. We're out of green chiretta. (*chuanxinlian*) I'm going to get some more. (*exit*)

Suzhen

She's going to the mountain by herself?

Qing

She's on her way to Xiao Chan's. You think Xuxian knows?

Suzhen  
Yes. I'm certain.

Qing  
How can he?

Suzhen  
I don't know, but he must. It's the only reason he would disappear without a word.

Qing  
He wouldn't desert you.

Suzhen  
Fahai has frightened him! I must go to the hermitage to find him.

Qing  
No, wait. Xuxian won't stay away. His son is still here.

**Black out**

**Scene 5 At Fahai's hermitage**

Xuxian  
Thank you for taking me in, even after I was so unjust. This has been the hardest time of my life. I've meditated...and prayed, and now, I must return to my family.

Fahai  
No.

Xuxian  
I can bear it. I must return.

Fahai  
No, you miss your woman and don't understand the viciousness of the snake.

Xuxian  
I have faith in her loving nature.

Fahai  
It is precisely her *nature* that is not loving.

Xuxian  
Then I can love...even a snake.

Fahai  
Such spirits play to our weaknesses. Have you never considered how or why she so perfectly matches your needs? Because as a flexible snake, she molds herself to you whichever way you turn. But beware the day she chooses to squeeze, and show her fangs. You'll be as helpless as a mouse.

Xuxian  
I've considered all the risks, and am willing to take them.



Fahai

I won't let you.

Xuxian

It's not your decision, or your right.

Fahai

But it's within my power. Return to your room. (*Xuxian exits against his will. Fahai sits down and writes a letter*) I'll write to the snake that I have her husband. She'll come with the child, using it to persuade him to return. Because she loves him, she will do anything to save him.

**Black out**

**Scene 6 At Fahai's hermitage.**

(*Qing enters, interrupting Fahai's meditation.*)

Fahai

What are you doing here?

Qing

You were expecting my sister?

Fahai

Xuxian requested her to come.

Qing

I know who wrote that letter.

Fahai

And I know what you are.

Qing

Yes, we meditated for a thousand years, and we've been blessed with our human form and mind. Do you defy The Buddha's blessing?

Fahai

Your sister did not maintain her purity. She deceived Xuxian.

Qing

She deceived no one. Her love is as pure as that of the best human wife.

Fahai

No, she has bound the man, and will soon bind the son. She won't be satisfied till she's caught them both.

Qing

Even if you reveal her to Xuxian, he'll still love her.

Fahai

Their feelings no longer matter; the townspeople won't allow it. Even his honesty and her kindness will be used against them. You should be grateful for my warning.

Qing

Why?

Fahai

To end it before the situation turns violent. Once they find out, the people will kill you.

Qing

And drink our blood? Is that why you told Xiao Chan to start the rumor about the sickness being a punishment for their marriage?

Fahai

Their union *is* the cause.

Qing

Nonsense. The filth in the wild animal markets is. The crowded caging and killing, the mix of blood and shit, fetid breeding ground of bacteria and virus.

Fahai

The filth of animals has indeed transferred to humans. The two should remain apart.

Qing

Then speak out against the poaching and eating of wild creatures...for health!

Fahai

This is not a health issue but a moral one.

Qing

Precisely. The careless genocide of whole species is immoral, not the marriage. Remember, if you kill my sister, you kill Xuxian too.

Fahai

I save him.

Qing

Monk, why do rail against them when you're silent about so many real evils?

Fahai

It transgresses the natural order. It threatens the human family.

Qing

I see. The wife beatings, the killing of baby girls goes on, and yet, you say nothing. But a loving couple who has never done anyone any harm, a man who was once your best friend marries a beautiful woman, and suddenly your universe collapses.

Fahai

*(grabs her)* How dare you?

Qing

Hah! You've touched a woman! Now you'll have to spend the next hundred days purifying yourself. (*recants*) No, no. I'm sorry. I beg you to give me a little time and I'll persuade them to leave.

Fahai

As long as they transgress, they cannot escape.

Qing

A man who removes himself from humanity to judge it is worse than a snake.

Fahai

You rail at me but you know I'm right. I don't fear or hate snakes. They visit me here, and coil at my feet. I recognize your beneficence and strength, but you must see this relationship is forbidden.

Qing

If our austerities allowed us to become human, we should be allowed to interact with humans...in every way.

Fahai

In every way?

Qing

(*faltering*) In the way...that my sister has.

Fahai

But not you?

Qing

I've not been so moved.

Fahai

Well, go now.

Qing

You won't say anything? You won't let him go?

Fahai

Come again, tomorrow. Perhaps, I'll have found another way.

Qing

Let Guanyin's mercy give you inspiration. (*leaves*)

Fahai

Is this her fault or mine? Is it the tempter or the tempted who sins most? I've laughed at Xuxian's folly and counseled other men against women who have the power to lure the clouds out of the sky. Now I, too, feel the sweet poison of the serpent's tooth. (*he closes his*

*eyes and tries to meditate*). I see nothing but her face. My chanting cannot silence the sweetness of her voice.

**Black out**

**Scene 7 At Fahai's hermitage**

Suzhen

*(enters with child)* Xuxian, I got your message and came as fast as I could.

Xuxian

I didn't send any message. Go quickly before Fahai comes. He wants to destroy you.

Suzhen

I don't care. If you still love me then nothing else matters.

Xuxian

I do love you.

Suzhen

And you know?

Xuxian

Yes, and still love you. In a moment of weakness, I ran away. But if you can endure, so can I.

Suzhen

Then there's nothing Fahai can do.

Xuxian

No, he's turning the town against you. You must leave and take the boy with you.

Suzhen

No, I won't go. Fahai will have to tear us apart. *(she moves toward Xuxian to kiss him but he suddenly shudders and steps back)*

Fahai

*(jumps out and catches her)* Hah, I have you, snake. His mouth speaks of love, but his body tells a deeper truth and rejects you. Xuxian, take the boy and go.

Suzhen

Don't leave me.

Xuxian

I can't help it. This is stronger than me. Stronger than my love. *(exit)*

Suzhen

But not stronger than mine! *(Fahai takes her inside)*

**Black out**

**Scene 8 At Fahai's hermitage**

Qing  
Fahai, come out. Release my sister.

Fahai  
Your stormy looks don't frighten me.

Qing  
I'm not afraid of you either, you fake monk.

Fahai  
Leave, while you're still free to do so.

Qing  
Release Suzhen, or I'll bring such storms as this mountain has never seen. Landslides will wipe away the town forever.

Fahai  
One word from me and the people will drink your blood.

Qing  
Keep your head bowed, monk. You can't threaten me; I'm no ordinary woman.

Fahai  
Precisely. As soon as you're challenged, you devolve back to your snake instincts.

Qing  
I merely fight a misguided power with a just one.

Fahai  
That's not a woman's best weapon. If you wish to save your sister, you should be more like her. Tender lips win more than stormy eyes. Control the tempest, and forego your cold-blooded indifference. Show that selfsame weakness as your sister...

Qing  
And find myself in her position?

Fahai  
I'm not muddle-headed like Xuxian. Our powers are more evenly matched.

Qing  
Sweet words from a monk's mouth? Shameless now, and ashamed after, when you'd curse me as an evil spirit sent to tempt you. You cannot have it both ways, monk.

Fahai  
But I can. It's you who are in conflict with yourself. When you became human, you took on a female's destiny.

Qing

I'm still an ancient deity that has never submitted to your cult.

Fahai

Submit now, and within three years, I'll release your sister.

Qing

Why three years?

Fahai

Xuxian will have taken a wife and forgotten the snake.

Qing

No, never! The tempest begins now.

Fahai

She's imprisoned under the temple. The landslides will only bury her deeper. She'll never be found.

Qing

It's you, Fahai, who won't know her fate. You are mortal and will die. (*thunder and lightning*)

**Black out**

## Epilogue

(*Yun stands with a live snake wrapped around her. Grandfather enters aghast.*)

Yun

I found her in a clay pot trapped under the temple. She's been waiting for me so long.

Grandfather

(*frightened*) Put it down, now!

Yun

Don't come near, you'll frighten her.

Grandfather

It'll bite you. It'll strangle you to death.

Yun

No, she knows who I am. We've been separated by many misunderstandings, but we've found each other at last. (*Yun kneels down and lets the snake glide off*) Now, she'll return to her home and I to mine.

Grandfather

I should never have told you the story.

Yun

You had no choice. I would have found out anyway. Once there were two snakes, one white as cloud and the other green as bamboo, who meditated for a thousand years and finally achieved their wish to become human. (*crack of thunder, two giant puppet snakes dance*)

**The End**