

DAWN OF THE SHE DEVIL OF THE CHINA SEAS

by

Roger W. Tang

Roger Tang  
4333 Brooklyn Ave. NE Box 359504  
Seattle, WA 98195  
206-365-0282  
Gwangung@uw.edu

CHARACTERS

YI SHIH	Refugee/prostitute/pirate-to-be. Asian female, late 20s. Can steamroller you with her sword arm, her brains or personality. Your choice.
YI XI	Sister to Shih. Leg injury in childhood frustrates her and blinds her to her own power. Asian female early 20s
CHENG AI	Pirate leader, Asian male 30s to 40s, Oozes testosterone and charisma
CHENG PAO	Ai's adopted son and second in command, Silver tongued, Asian male mid 20s
TAI YU	Chinese god of destiny; impersonal and mysterious. Struggles to bring his thoughts down to human level.
WU TSU	Chinese immortal/sorceress; Asian female 30s to 50s, exudes power and command. China First! (And her leading China)
HUANG ZHONG	Middle aged Asian male, sailor. Weaselly.
HUANG LING	His young niece
JIN GUANG	Young Nobleman, Asian male, 20s
PEI	Crewman in Ai's fleet, Zhong's buddy. Asian male
MING FONG, LI HUANG	Fellow pirate captains, Asian males
ASSORTED SAILORS & RUFFIANS	
YIN	WU's familiar. Possible puppet.

Note: Dialogue by main characters are in Cantonese. Dialogue in italics are in a language not understood by main characters.

# SETTING

China

## TIME

Bulk of the play takes place in 1801.

## ACT I

Scene 1	Small village.	1794 or so.
Scene 2	Guangzhou docks	1801-ish
Scene 3	Docks, NING-PAH	Next day
Scene 4	Deck of the NING-PAH	Several days later
Scene 5	Danchang Harbor	Days later
Scene 6	The NING-PAH	Immediately afterwards
Scene 7	Deck of the NING-PAH	A day later

## ACT II

Scene 1	Ai's Cabin, on the NING-PAH	A Day later
Scene 2	The NING-PAH	That evening
Scene 3	Guangzhou Harbor	A Day Later
Scene 4	The NING-PAH	That Evening
Scene 5	The NING-PAH	Weeks later
Scene 6	Epilogue	Immediately after

ACT I, SCENE 1

(A foggy stage. WU TSU, an ageless figure, enters. She is blindfolded, but moves as if sighted. YIN, a lizard/dragon-like creature prances. )

WU

Yin, old friend. China looks strong, eh? New borders. New trade partners. Peace. But...gleaming gold may hide rot beneath, eh? Floods. Famine. Foreign devils infesting our ports. Signs that the gods are displeased--and have withdrawn their blessings.

(chuckles)

We can do something about that. Let's nudge the gods into picking a new ruler.

(to YIN)

Yes, yes...humans are foolish to meddle with gods. But then...I am no ordinary human, am I?

(WU uses a scrying device to perform a ritual. a slow, rhythmic beat and more fog fills the stage...and power swirls around WU with each word.)

(Let's appropriate. Company members in black can represent "unholy energy" or act as *koken*. Be imaginative)

VOICES (O.S)

Destiny!

WU

The mandate of heaven has been lost!

VOICES (O.S.)

Destiny!

WU

We must have a new leader to regain their blessings!

VOICES (O.S.)

Destiny!

WU

Someone to rise up, to take up the obligations of ruling! Where is the new ruler! Where? Where?!

(Through the mists, strides a fearsome, regal figure: TAI YU, the Chinese god of destiny)

TAI YU

Destiny.

WU

Great one, we need your blessings! Descend from your throne on the eastern peak to forge a new mandate... and find a new leader!

(TAI YU looks around. Suddenly, he spies WU and cocks his head)

TAI YU

Destiny?

WU

Yes, lord, it may feel early, but China is in need! You feel it, don't you? A new leader is needed!

TAI YU

(nods slowly)

Destiny!

(He hurls his hands skywards)

SEEK!

(Golden threads swirl from his hands)

WU

Watch! The golden threads of destiny will search China, to find the one most capable of leading.

(Suddenly, through the fog, European pirates chase farmers/peasants)

PIRATES

*No quarter, mates! Leave none alive!*

(There is chaos and death. Through the fog burst a pair of siblings, SHIH and XI, age 14 and 9)

XI

I--I can't run anymore. The pain---

SHIH

Keep going. Don't let them catch us!

XI

But my leg! I can't go on!

SHIH

We must---We must--Then we must hide.

XI

They-they killed--

SHIH

Sh. Sh. Don't think about it. I'll protect you. Here!

(They duck behind some wreckage)

Not a sound.

(A PIRATE enters, sniffing out prey.)

PIRATES

*Ar...I knew ye be out there, my pretties.*

(searches)

*Ye have spirit. I like that in the pretty ones. Tis makes it so sweet when I have ye...the younger the better I say...*

(He chuckles evilly. In desperation, SHIH tosses a few pebbles away from the PIRATE to fool him. He exits, seeking the phantom sounds)

SHIH

Gods and ancestors...that was more luck than what a gambler sees in a lifetime.

(to XI)

Xi. Are you all right? Wake up! We must go! XI!

(Tries to waken XI, who has fainted.

Hears PIRATES in the distance)

Five thunders strike those devils dead!

(She spies a discarded sword. She tries to lift it...and fails)

Gods above! If I had the strength--

TAI YU

(making his presence known)

Child.

SHIH

Who are you?? Are you--

TAI YU

(pointing to himself)

Tai Yu.

SHIH

What does the exalted one want with me??

TAI YU

Look up.

(Startled, SHIH looks up and sees a golden thread settles near her)

SHIH

What---

(SHIH touches a thread)

Oh, it tingles!

TAI YU

Destiny

(points to thread and SHIH)

Destiny.

SHIH

M-me? But I'm just a poor girl? And---

PIRATE

(entering)

*Aye, my pretty, ye thought ye could fool me!*

(Startled, SHIH snaps out of her  
trance. She circles warily as the  
PIRATE advances)

*When I be done wit' ye...maybe I give a go wi' yer  
sister, eh?*

(He charges. SHIH snatches the sword  
she struggled with only moments before,  
and wields it like a master. She easily  
dispatches the PIRATE)

SHIH

But, it was so heavy--

TAI YU

Strength yours. Always yours.

(points to threads and to SHIH)

Destiny. Unleashed. WILL unleash.

SHIH

Oh. OH. Then I must make a vow.

(TAI YU seems startled)

A vow of chastity, perhaps. To allow no man to bed me  
unless he first defeats me in battle? To properly  
honor the gift from the gods. Will that do?

(There is a moment of silence. Then TAI  
YU bursts out laughing)

TAI YU

Mortals!

SHIH

My lord--

TAI YU

(still chuckling)

TAI YU (CONT'D)

Destiny. Vow or no vow.  
(point to SHIH)  
You. China. Now one.

SHIH

I don't understand...

TAI YU

(points to XI)  
Daughter...sister...duty...family  
(points back to SHIH)  
Daughter. Her. You. Duty. China.

SHIH

My duty is to China? But what about Xi?! She needs--

TAI YU

All one.  
(touches SHIH's forehead)  
Be at peace.

SHIH

My country...my family...? What do I do? What tasks  
must I perform? What--

TAI YU

You...  
(pointing at SHIH's hands. Perhaps a  
magical sound effect can be heard.)  
...will KNOW. Farewell. Daughter of China.  
  
(TAI YU steps into ineffability, though  
still watching. SHIH is alone)

SHIH

To meet one's gods...  
(She shivers and drops her sword.)  
Fever dreams. Nothing but...  
(She glances at the body. Not a  
hallucination)

XI

(recovering)

Shih...

SHIH

Xi, are you all right?

XI

It hurts!

SHIH

It looks bad. Can you walk?



XI

If I can lean on you...  
(glances around)  
What happened?

SHIH

A miracle. Let's get out of here.

(XI and SHIH limp offstage. Lights  
shift to WU)

WU

All honor to you, great Tai Yu. We have new hands to  
take up the mandate of heaven!  
(TAI YU nods. He exits into the mists.)  
Quickly, Yin! The gold threads--before they fade!  
They're the surest way to find---  
(The threads fade from sight)  
Too late. They are gone.  
(YIN yammers and WU answers.)  
Of course that's not good. We know what Tai Yu's  
favored one LOOKS like. But not WHERE she is.  
(sighs)  
The hard way, then. Sifting through hundreds of  
thousands of lives...It will take time, even for one  
like me. But I WILL find her. China once was first  
among nations. It will be again...with the right  
guidance.  
(YIN questions.)  
Of course she can't supply that, Yin. But I can.  
(YIN snarks)  
The young and foolish think they can command their  
fate. But they must all submit to higher purposes and  
higher powers. One way or another, her gifts will  
serve China, and the middle kingdom WILL regain the  
eminence it deserves.  
(Lights fade.)

ACT I, SCENE 2

(Flash forward a few years.  
Guangzhou docks. Seedy, with men  
looking for a good time. SHIH is a  
working girl. It's cold.)

SHIH

(to passing sailor)

Well, sailor? Want a good time...?

(He exits. A nervous, well dressed man  
enters. SHIH saunters up to him)

SHIH

Nervous? You look like a rich merchant trying not to  
be seen with a prostitute.

(beat)

Relax. You blend in PERFECTLY.

JIN GUANG

Ah. Yes. Indeed.

SHIH

Didn't recognize you without your usual flock of  
foreigners.

JIN GUANG

You have the note from...HER?

SHIH

Yes.

JIN GUANG

Good. Now here's the two--

SHIH

Three.

JIN GUANG

I thought--

SHIH

Three.

JIN GUANG

It's a little much---

SHIH

Three. Not just anyone can sneak into a nobleman's  
home. Certainly none of your pale ghosts.

JIN GUANG

But you're a--

SHIH

We dress up all the time. I'm always prepared.

JIN GUANG

But still---

SHIH

And not any whore can read the language noblewomen  
fool with, to find the right daughter.

JIN GUANG

Two should be--

SHIH

AND not just anyone can deliver the love poetry that  
sent your lady love mooning into the sky.

JIN GUANG

I don't--Wait. I didn't write any poetry.

SHIH

I know. I wrote it myself. "Your eyes are limpid  
autumn waters I long to dive into..." The only body  
parts you've managed to see. "The soft swell of your  
comforting breast." I assume you like breasts; that IS  
her best feature. "The gentle sway of your walk--"

JIN GUANG

Enough!

SHIH

No foot binding erotica in public?

JIN GUANG

You are impertinent--!!

(checks himself)

But that allows you to succeed where others failed. I  
can't have one without the other.

SHIH

I like that about you, Jin Guang. Every so often, good  
sense over-rides your pride.

(Beat)

Three.

JIN GUANG

Very well.

(Taking a note from SHIH, he exits,  
reading rapturously. SHIH looks  
wistfully to the sea and sighs.)

SHIH

I wish...

(Breaks her mood and looks skyward)  
Vow of chastity, indeed. A fine godly jest...  
(She shivers. XI enters, limping. She hands SHIH a wrap)

XI

Here.

SHIH

I meant to pick it up on the way out, but--

XI

You forgot--

SHIH

There was so much to do--

XI

And you let this slip--.

SHIH

Sorry, I--

XI

Stop! I'm teasing! All you do is earn our bread, provide a roof and carry the sky on your back! The ancestors aren't offended if you forget a wrap on your way out.

(fusses with wrap)

Hold still...you need to drape it like this---and this---show off the merchandise properly.

SHIH

You're fussing...

XI

I want to be useful! If you're going to be disgraceful, be bold about it!

SHIH

Sometimes I think you want to be out here, not me.

XI

Double the shame, double the fun!

SHIH

You're unusually cheerful. What's wrong?

XI

(sighs)

The authorities. They swept the docks, scattering the beggars, and...I lost today's take AND our best begging bowl. I tried to be careful, but...

SHIH

We'll get over this.

XI

I was too slow! I'm not pulling my weight.

SHIH

Yes, you are! Look!

(brings out coins)

WE managed to wring some extra cash from that lovesick merchant. You helped write the poem!

XI

But you delivered it. You risked sneaking in. You were THERE...and I'm useless.

SHIH

You do your share.

(indicates dress)

You were always good at clothes...without your eye, I'd be TERRIBLE at this.

XI

It's not enough

SHIH

You take care of Chai's little ones when she's away. You ADORE that.

XI

I only get paid when she has enough money--which isn't often these days!

SHIH

Then, how about---

XI

(stifling a shiver)

The shamans?

SHIH

You've learned so much from them.

(Beat)

You're afraid.

XI

They tread where spirits and gods dwell. Only a fool would not be wary.

SHIH

Still, they INVITED you to join.

(XI nods)

They are not careless in their invitations. They wouldn't admit anyone who couldn't handle it.

XI

Still...

SHIH

You're cautious. That's good. This isn't child's play. But you're no child anymore, are you? It calls to you, doesn't it? Meet the challenge. You're ready.

XI

I will! Thank you.

(The two hug)

SHIH

Now, off with you! I need to bring in at least a pittance!

(XI limps off as SHIH shivers)

Damn cold tonight.

(A trio of rowdy, seemingly drunk FOREIGN SAILORS enter)

Ten hells. Foriegners.

FOREIGN SAILORS

*Avast! Sink me!! China doll! Pretty! Wanna bestow these tired jacks a ride?*

SHIH

Sorry, kind sirs, not tonight...

FOREIGN SAILORS

*Avast! Ye not hear?! Ye so pretty! I have a fierce fire in me belly for ye!*

SHIH

I said, this merchant isn't open for business for you!

FOREIGN SAILORS

*Wha'--we be nah good enough fer ye? Reckon ye're too good fer us? Fer OUR kind?*

SHIH

Now, boys...

(This is getting dangerous. SHIH settles into a crouch. CHENG AI enters)

CHENG AI

Yes...BOYS...what seems to be the problem here?

FOREIGN SAILORS

*Arr...We be finding this wench first. Mind ye own business.*

CHENG AI

I can barely understand you barbarians, but I want to be the lady's customer! I've every right to haggle!

FOREIGN SAILOR

*Nah when 'tis three against one.*

CHENG AI

("casually" baring his sword)

Sounds like even odds, eh?

(Smiles. Evilily. Seemingly cowed, the three FOREIGN SAILORS slink off)

SHIH

My big brave pirate captain comes to port!

(AI sweeps her into an embrace & kiss.)

CHENG AI

And he comes in bigger and richer every day! Not bothered by those louts, were you?

SHIH

When they're cowed by the mere gaze of the notorious Cheng Ai?

(shrugs)

Foreign devils.

(spits)

I can handle them just fine.

CHENG AI

Never hurts to have an extra sword on your side, eh?

SHIH

Heard you ran into the Imperial Navy.

CHENG AI

They couldn't find their ass with a map and a helping hand!

SHIH

Miss me?

CHENG AI

Counting the days till I could see my girl!

(He goes for another kiss, but...)

SHIH

First taste was free--anything more needs payment!

CHENG AI

Honest work deserves honest pay. Is your shop open for this weary traveler?

SHIH

The lamps are lit and the windows flung open.

CHENG AI

Perhaps to entertain a proposition?

SHIH

Something unusual in mind? Might cost you...

CHENG AI

Not that unusual...

SHIH

Unwind, first. Repeat customers are always welcome!

(She's about to continue, but stops)

Wait. Something's not right.

CHENG AI

What do you--?

(He feels it too. They suddenly hear a sound and give a start.)

Eh, just a rat....

(Suddenly an assailant barrels on stage straight into CHENG AI. The rest of the FOREIGN SAILORS rush on stage)

FOREIGN SAILOR 1

*Grab the wench. Save her for afterwards!*

FOREIGN SAILOR 2

*Aye! I've got her--*

(No, he doesn't. SHIH breaks away.  
CHENG AI wrestles with his foe.)

FOREIGN SAILOR 1

*For the love of--*

FOREIGN SAILOR 2

*I've had enough of this!*

(He draws a knife, but SHIH dances a martial arts ballet, snatching up found objects to defend and attack, knocking weapons and teeth to the floor. She KO's one. It's too much for the other. He tries to flee.....but...)



SHIH

Sir. You left this behind.

(She plunges the leftover knife into his chest. Exhilarated, she holds up her hands)

The tingling...so strong...

(glancing to the sky)

Tai Yu?

(A sudden crack interrupts her as CHENG AI finally subdues his opponent)

CHENG AI

Pig! If your fellows have harmed---

(He turns and notices the mess SHIH has left behind)

Like thunder from a clear sky. You...seem to keep your head in a fight.

SHIH

Yes.

CHENG AI

Even with odds of two 'gainst one.

SHIH

I make do.

CHENG AI

(smiling)

That...more than pleases me.

SHIH

Oh, I can tell...

(They're interrupted by a groan from the man SHIH knocked out)

CHENG AI

(goes to assailant)

Dog! What is the meaning of this!

(Assailant just groans. AI kicks him)

Answer me! You know I understand your pig talk!

(Kicks him again)

I said, answer!

FOREIGN SAILOR

*Avast, stop! Stop!*

(Winces)

*You be havin' made a lot o' enemies, Cheng.*

CHENG AI

Been doing that for years. I want names!

FOREIGN SAILOR

*Ye 'n yer heathen crew 'ave been a thorn in the sides  
o' too many scallywags. Ye needed t' be plucked.*

CHENG AI

Really now...

FOREIGN SAILOR

*We aimed t' collect. So we jus' waited till ye came t'  
visit yer fav'rit strumpet t' make our move.*

CHENG AI

Next time, bring more men. Matey.

(He kills the wounded assailant)

SHIH

Always showing a girl a nice time, Captain Cheng. A  
price on your head?

CHENG AI

The barbarians never liked me or my fleet. Guess they  
decided to do something about it.

SHIH

Hate those pale-assed savages.

CHENG AI

Sorry to get you mixed up in this. They used you to  
get to me. This isn't the end of it.

SHIH

You don't need to keep an eye on me! Protect yourself!

CHENG AI

I WANT to look out for you--

SHIH

I can take care of myself, Ai.

CHENG AI

I want to look out for BOTH of us...My proposition--

SHIH

I don't understand.

CHENG AI

We hardly need go-betweens...

SHIH

What are you talking about?

CHENG AI

Ghah! This isn't coming out right! Oh, what the hell.  
(gets down on one knee)  
Yi Shih, I want you to become my wife!

(There is stunned silence for a beat.  
Then SHIH bursts out laughing)

SHIH

Ai, I never pegged you as a husband!

CHENG AI

A man's gotta settle down some time! And think about  
WHO to settle down with!

SHIH

Oh. Ohhhh. Aren't you going a bit...overboard?

CHENG AI

Not at all! You step up and out with me!

SHIH

Step up to dirty dishes and mending moldy clothes?

CHENG AI

You know what I mean! A better life!

SHIH

I have options---

CHENG AI

Name them!

SHIH

I've...I've had other proposals.....And...and...you're  
going to have to convince me that yours is the best!

CHENG AI

I have the biggest fleet!

SHIH

That's what they ALL say...

CHENG AI

YOU...

(takes a beat)

...are stalling. And need time to think. Take it! It  
doesn't matter--your best destiny lies with me!

SHIH

It--does?

CHENG AI

Don't fail to recognize Mount Tai! Don't pass this up!

SHIH

Mount Tai. Tai Yu. Indeed. Would you include a sister?

AI

Even better!

SHIH

Don't get any ideas!

AI

Gods forbid! I AM going to be a married man! I just offer better lives on my ship than you can get here.

SHIH

You can prove it?

AI

Come aboard, name your terms...and see for yourself!

SHIH

What if I can find a better ship AND better captain?

AI

I accept that challenge...because none is better!

SHIH

Well, then...done.

AI

Done!

(AI extends a hand. Startled, SHIH takes it and shakes. Lights to WU.)

WU

Tai Yu's favored one has taken a crucial step...her destiny burns brighter than ever...so bright that I can locate her!

(peers into scrying device)

Long have I waited for this opportunity. Progressing from healer to shaman to sorcerer. And finally...No! She moves out to sea! The connection fades!

(pounds the ground in frustration)

Magic is too slow! I must have mortal tools. Avatars of flesh and blood to seek and to pursue---and to flush out my quarry so I may take her!

(Lights fade on unearthly scene)

ACT I, SCENE 3

(Early morning, on the docks near the  
NING-PAH, CHENG AI's flagship)

SHIH

This way...Captain Cheng's ship is this way! So eager  
for you to meet him!

XI

I can tell, but---

SHIH

I feel like I've leaped to heaven in a single bound!

XI

This seems...so sudden. In the middle of the night--we  
know so little--

SHIH

When fortune smiles on you, seize the chance!

XI

But have you thought it all through? Considered your  
options? Pondered the drawbacks, like you usually do?

SHIH

I have a feeling, Xi. A certain...prickling at my  
fingertips...that it'll turn out right.

XI

Are you seeing straight?

SHIH

And I'm not done! There's more to come! I'll take all  
the chances and see what happens!

XI

I've never seen you so giddy.

SHIH

I've met my future! Now see for yourself!

(XI looks at the gangplank, then back  
at SHIH. Suddenly she stops dead.)

XI

No.

SHIH

What?

XI

I said no.

(abruptly sits down)  
I won't go any further.

(SHIH attempts to drag XI upright, but  
XI goes limp, making it impossible for  
SHIH to handle. SHIH stops)

SHIH  
This is ridiculous--What's gotten into you?

XI  
I won't--I can't be a party to such--such madness!

SHIH  
Madness? Captain Cheng asked me to marry him. That's  
not very remarkable, is it?

XI  
Remarkable is not the word for this outrage!

SHIH  
Marrying an able provider is a GOOD thing, not an  
outrage.

XI  
It's not marriage...it's him!

SHIH  
I'm the one who'll marry him--

XI  
Marriage means family...I'm family, which involves me!  
And I do not want my sister married to a pirate!  
(Beat. XI turns away)  
I sound ungrateful. It IS an opportunity. But I can't  
go on that ship...I can't.

SHIH  
So...what should I do? Keep spreading my legs for  
customers till I'm old and gray?

XI  
These are pirates. Pirates killed our parents! And--  
(glances at her leg).  
They haunt my dreams, mock my hopes--!

SHIH  
That was then. This is Cheng Ai.

XI  
Both pillage and plunder.

SHIH

Men are men...but you choose those who're good to you.  
Others...you avoid no matter how enticing they are.

XI

And Cheng Ai is good?

SHIH

He and his men have fine reputations. They don't force  
women to be concubines. When other fleets come to  
port, women just...vanish.

XI

But a wife has duties to her husband. Which leaves  
me...where?

SHIH

With me. ALWAYS with me.

XI

Still...

SHIH

He MUST be on his best behavior--if he's unkind to me  
OR you, I drop him like a hot stone and he knows it.  
(trying a different tack)  
You're not losing a sister. You're gaining a new life.

XI

I don't know...

SHIH

At least...a trial?  
(SHIH offers her hand to XI. A beat. Xi  
reluctantly takes it. )  
You may be surprised at what you find...and I still  
intend to press my luck.  
(SHIH helps her to her feet and they  
continue)

CHENG AI

Ahoy, visitors!

SHIH

(glancing at XI)

Ahoy, Captain! Permission to come aboard?

CHENG AI

Granted!

(bows to his guests)

Welcome, mistresses, to the NING-PAH, finest ship to  
sail the China Seas! And, soon...your new home?

SHIH

We'll see, won't we, Xi? Captain, my sister, Xi. Xi, this is Captain Cheng Ai, who's asked me to marry him.

(XI manages an awkward curtsy)

CHENG AI

My deepest pleasure. I--

(PAO enters, interrupting him)

PAO

Sir, before we cast off...Huang Zhong?

CHENG AI

Now?

PAO

She's hurt again.

CHENG AI

(suddenly turning dark)

Show him in.

(An older man, HUANG ZHONG, and a young girl HUANG LING enter. She favors her left arm, which SHIH notes.)

AI

Let's talk about you and your niece...

ZHONG

Good for nothing, disobedient child! You shame me in front of my captain! I apologize profusely, Captain!

AI

Zhong, you're apologizing for something I haven't said anything about.

ZHONG

No need to waste the Captain's time, I can take care of this myself and we'll be on our way. We'll just--

CHENG AI

Zhong, I brought both of you here for a reason.

ZHONG

Sir, I--

PAO

The captain asks, you answer. Understood?

ZHONG

Yes, sir.



CHENG AI  
Good. Good morning, Ling. How are you?

HUANG LING  
Fine, sir.

CHENG AI  
Your arm. You seem hurt.

LING  
A fall, sir, a bruise!

CHENG AI  
Let me see.  
(AI examines her arm. LING winces)  
Broken.

ZHONG  
She's just a clumsy child, sir, and--

CHENG AI  
That's a serious matter, for a child at sea. Something  
I must look into...

ZHONG  
No need to waste the Captain's time, I can handle this  
with no fuss. We can--

CHENG AI  
Zhong, to care for Ling honors your brother. But  
raising an accident prone child may be too much.

ZHONG  
But I'm her uncle!

CHENG AI  
And you're my sailor. Doing both seems to be a  
challenge. Maybe...concentrate on just one job?

ZHONG  
But--who will take care of Ling!

SHIH  
Captain Cheng...perhaps we can be of help?  
(CHENG AI looks at her)  
Ling's old enough for chores? And just needs someone  
to check on her every now and then?  
(CHENG AI nods)  
Why not have my sister look after her?

XI  
What---what???

ZHONG

Captain--!

(CHENG AI shushes ZHONG)

SHIH

Ling could introduce Xi to the ship and how you work. Xi's looked after far younger children and would LOVE to sit with such a sweet child. Right, Xi?

XI

You play dirty, Shih.

SHIH

Captain Cheng has a need. Ling needs a minder. We can serve both.

(XI hesitates, obviously tempted)

Feeling overmatched...by an 11 year old?

XI

Certainly not! Captain Cheng, I'd be more than happy to keep an eye on Ling.

ZHONG

But my niece!

CHENG AI

Zhong, you have a job to attend to. We can care for your niece. Dismissed.

(Anger and fear war with ZHONG. Then he exits abruptly)

CHENG AI

Pao, take Ling to the healers.

(PAO and LING exit)

Mind you, this is temporary, until we find a more permanent arrangement.

XI

Of course. I LOVE children!

SHIH

Will there be trouble with--

AI

Zhong? Hm. After losing his brother...he started to press. Saw himself as an arrow at the end of its flight. Perhaps with focus, he can be himself again.

(PAO re-enters)

PAO

Ling's with the doctor. We're ready to cast off.

CHENG AI

Thank you, Pao.

(turning to SHIH)

Apologies for the delayed introductions. Shih, this is Cheng Pao, my deputy...and adopted son. Pao, this is Yi Shih, a resident of the Guangzhou docks--

PAO

Brothels.

CHENG AI

And her sister, Yi Xi. They are guests.

PAO

Greetings to you, fair visitor.

(SHIH moves protectively in front of  
XI. PAO smiles)

Our decks are not graced often by ones so beautiful, Misstress Xi, but we shall be up to the task. I assume, Captain/Father, you have called upon your shopping skills once more?

SHIH

Young Pao seems well versed in the diplomatic arts--as well as being one cheeky bastard.

PAO

A hallmark of one who knows his position and his uses.

CHENG AI

Whenever I need someone to spread the night soil and other odd jobs.

PAO

Indeed. I wonder what uses you'll find for Miss Shih?

SHIH

How did you adopt Pao?

CHENG AI

Won him in a card game. Best pot I ever won!

PAO

I started out as neither son OR deputy...but I claimed my place when fortune called...and held it.

SHIH

(as the two eye each other warily)

I see.

CHENG AI

Pao can take your sister to the healer. She can look after Ling while we discuss...business.

PAO

Indeed. Follow me!

(XI gets up stiffly and goes to her  
bags, but PAO intercepts)

Allow me!

XI

I can manage.

PAO

I know you can...but why? When you have beautiful  
brute force labor to do your bidding?

(XI is hesitant)

What sort of hosts make their guests carry their own  
belongings? We are blood-thirsty pirates, but we are  
not ingrates!

XI

(smiling at last)

Thank you.

PAO

Not that this will pain me overly much. Twill be a  
pleasure to lend you aid!

(The two exit)

SHIH

Her lameness won't be a problem?

CHENG AI

If she can defend herself--

(SHIH nods)

Then, she will do well here. As for you...

SHIH

Yes.

CHENG AI

Yes. Let's talk terms

(The waiting game. CHENG AI goes first)

I like you, Shih...

SHIH

I can tell...

CHENG AI

You like me...And marriage starts there, doesn't it?

SHIH

It does...and...?

CHENG AI

I would offer the finest perfumes, the loveliest gowns, the finest silks, the most beautiful jewelry--

SHIH

NO. You offer what you THINK a woman wants. Try offering what I ACTUALLY want.

CHENG AI

Woman, I would give the world for you!

SHIH

Figuratively. Try...literally.

CHENG AI

Eh?

SHIH

You boast of the biggest fleet in these waters. You've beaten Imperial and European navies. You effectively rule the China Seas. Try making that literal.

CHENG AI

My fellow pirates wouldn't sit still for one of their own to lord over them.

SHIH

Not an obstacle for you. It's within your grasp.

CHENG AI

Knocking sense into that many heads is difficult.

SHIH

Force isn't your only tool. Diplomacy works, too.

CHENG AI

On those bloodthirsty fools?

SHIH

In. Your. Grasp. You run your fleet the same way.

(CHENG AI hesitates)

Don't tell me it hasn't crossed your mind. You've dreamed about it. And I want a part.

CHENG AI

Hadn't thought you'd be interested in power.

SHIH

Foreign devils slaughtered my family. The Imperials never followed up. If you need a job done right...

CHENG AI

You know me. You know my dreams.

SHIH

Uniting the fleets will take more than you. Pao can help, but you need more. A partner. With loyalty that can't be questioned...because it's blood deep.

AI

Which means...

SHIH

Because you want to rule, as a sovereign. That takes an heir. Which means...ME.

CHENG AI

Mayyyybeee...

SHIH

Don't play hard to get; you're not good at it.

CHENG AI

I defer to the expert. But what are you getting at?

SHIH

Establishing my worth. I won't take second day leftovers when you dream of so much yourself. You said you can make the best deal? Here's your chance.

CHENG AI

Indeed. A challenge. Let's see how well I know YOUR mind? Let me a guess...you want a place for you.

SHIH

Yes.

CHENG AI

AND a place for your sister. That can't be shaken no matter what happens between us.

SHIH

Good boy. Yes.

CHENG AI

And you want tools. Skills of your own, that no one can take from you. A role beyond Cheng Ai's woman.

SHIH

VERY good....And?

CHENG AI

And?!?

SHIH

A path to be a true partner. I want to command.

(beat)

AI

You think highly of yourself.

SHIH

You think highly of me. I should do no less.

CHENG AI

Command isn't given out lightly. It must be earned.

SHIH

A chance must be given before it's earned.

CHENG AI

Do you even know what command means?

SHIH

No one's born knowing that. Everyone learns that. You had to learn. Allow me the same.

(Beat)

You've not said, "No."

CHENG AI

A chance. But a chance only.

SHIH

Just so. Think of it as...a dowry. A dowry that will enrich you ONLY after you teach me. No training, no dowry. No dowry...NO WEDDING BED.

CHENG AI

Putting obstacles in the way to my heart's desire?

SHIH

An incentive. Not the first time I've made a man wait for his reward.

CHENG AI

No down payment?

SHIH

Work first! Reward later!

(Lights out)

ACT I, SCENE 4  
(Late at night. SHIH has exchanged her street walker garb for sailor work clothes. She is attempting to sleep. An eerie dreamscape dominates the stage.)

VOICE  
Daughter...Young daughter...I call you.

SHIH  
What? Who goes there?

VOICE  
Daughter...Young daughter...I call you!

SHIH  
Where are you? Show yourself!

VOICE  
Young daughter, I call you...to hold fast to your path, and embrace honor and duty!

SHIH  
Who ARE you?

VOICE  
You know my voice...It calls from your bones. You've known my voice for generations.

SHIH  
The ancestors...

VOICE  
Young daughter, I call from within you....

SHIH  
Are you grandmother? Or great grandmother?

VOICE  
I am beyond three generations, but never doubt the call of blood to blood!

SHIH  
I--I feel it. Aunty! But where are you?

VOICE  
I speak to you in your dreams. I have called and called. At last you answer!

SHIH  
Don't ancestors talk only to the sons? Why talk to me?

VOICE  
Which sons are left to hear?



(SHIH crumples at this)  
Do you still feel the loss of your kin?

SHIH  
Yes.

VOICE  
You still grieve. You are a good daughter.

SHIH  
I miss my family. I must be brave for my sister. But  
when I'm alone--

VOICE  
See comfort with me. Speak freely and grieve. You  
bring virtue to the family. All China will salute it.

SHIH  
Tai Yu?

VOICE  
You have his favor. You lift your ancestors with your  
efforts. How far you may go with your tasks! Where in  
China are they taking you?

SHIH  
I...I do not know. Yet. I have yet to learn  
navigation. But I will. I will learn it all. And--  
(sways a bit)  
Oh, I feel---

VOICE  
I must leave. It is not good for the living to linger  
with the dead, even in dreams.

SHIH  
But I have so much to ask--

VOICE  
You have a great destiny. Honor your ancestors and  
fulfill it.

SHIH  
Aunty....aunty...don't go yet!

VOICE  
Farewell, young daughter. We will talk again.  
(Lights dim on SHIH)  
Such a delightful girl. So eager to please.  
(lights up to reveal WU as the VOICE)  
It will make it so much easier.  
(shudders)  
It is taxing to throw my spirit blindly into the  
darkness. But to lure her to me...

(YIN yammers.)

I know the danger. Even I am not immune to her charisma. But I think deception will serve me well...

(WU chuckles to YIN)

Yes, she COULD pierce through, expose the falsehoods. But the best way to lie...is to tell the truth.

(Lights fade on WU. Lights up on SHIH who wakes and goes on deck. She glances skyward, not noticing PEI and ZHONG)

SHIH

Tai Yu, your hand has been on me since the docks. Forgive my doubts, Great One.

ZHONG

The Captain's new doxy thinks she can talk to the gods. Is she god touched? Or just touched?

SHIH

Master Zhong, I didn't realize--

ZHONG

She doesn't realize the god she addresses thinks mere mortals are beneath him. Perhaps you think the same?

PEI

Ease up on the novice, Zhong.

SHIH

PARDON me, Master Zh--

ZHONG

Is it family she finds so unworthy? She wraps the Captain around her little finger, to get MY niece??

PEI

Zhong, don't blame her for--

(ZHONG shakes him off)

Be that way. I'm not indulging your tantrum.

(exits)

SHIH

Captain Cheng decided that before I came aboard. My sister and I--

ZHONG

How fortunate. To have riches drop into your lap.

SHIH

None of us control the will of the gods.

ZHONG

The gods must love the young and beautiful. Bat your eyes? They smile upon you. The ugly and old? They turn away in disgust and scorn.

SHIH

Truly, I had no hand in this--

ZHONG

We toil all our lives for a chance at glory. Yet, some empty headed wench snatches it away without a care.

SHIH

You had your opportunity. With your job and Ling. What did you do with it?

ZHONG

I---I---

(turns away)

---Wish I had another chance.

SHIH

Oh?

ZHONG

The captain says the seas are cruel to the soft and weak. Like...like...

SHIH

(softly)

Your brother?

ZHONG

Ling and I need to be tough to survive!

SHIH

But you hurt her.

ZHONG

Yes I did. Now I cannot make amends. It's all gone. Fortune. Advancement. A man's family. Thanks to you. Bitch. Whore.

(ZHONG lunges after SHIH, as XI and LING enter)

XI

Shih, I--oh!

(ZHONG grabs for LING. XI fumbles at her belt and drops something. The scuffle allows SHIH to intervene and thwart ZHONG easily)

SHIH

The Captain's made his wishes clear. I support the captain. You should, too.

(ZHONG glares at her, then exits. SHIH glances at XI)

XI

A potion I learned from the healers. For emergencies.

SHIH

Practice throwing them is probably as important as making them.

XI

I wish I made more so I COULD practice. That was...unpleasant.

SHIH

Not the best way to introduce myself to the crew.

(XI raises an eyebrow)

Captain Cheng has pledged a place for you. I must do more than that. I must win the crew to my side.

XI

You think you can do that?

SHIH

People are people. Just like our neighbors back in Guangzhou. The start always looks bad; it's the end that matters.

XI

Which may NOT be here...?

(SHIH shrugs. XI turns to LING)

Ling, are we done here?

(LING shakes her head)

There's more to show me here?

(LING nods her head)

Ling, can you say one word aloud?

(LING shakes her head and manages a small smile)

Ah! A smile...but no words! We'll get you talking yet!

(LING actually giggles. XI moves in to hug, but LING steps back instinctively)

Ah. Well, then...would you like me to play with you after you show me the rest?

(LING relaxes and nods.)

SHIH

It may be that--

XI

Patience, Shih, patience.

SHIH

She's not the only bruised child we've met.

XI

But she's one we can SAVE.

(PAO enters.)

PAO

Good morning, kind ladies. And how is Ling doing with her tasks?

XI

She does well, sir! Such a sweet and obedient child!

PAO

Good! Carry on! I could come by later to check on you and her; perhaps, lend an hand?

(XI nods; PAO to SHIH, more coolly)

My Captain/Father will be along for you shortly.

(SHIH acknowledges. PAO and XI begin a game of trying to "subtly" attract each others attention. CHENG AI enters.)

CHENG AI

Pao. Greetings, Mistress Xi. Ready for your first instruction, Mistress Shih?

SHIH

Lesson?

CHENG AI

You were to have a sailor to train and tutor you.

SHIH

(carefully)

I've seen no one.

CHENG AI

I expect my men not to be tardy. I specifically ordered---

SHIH

Pardon. Your relationship with your men is your business. MY relationship with them is MY problem.

CHENG AI

(musing at her)

Hm. Very...astute. But you must have your lesson.

(hands a practice sword to SHIH)

Here!

SHIH

A test?

CHENG AI

Setting a level. You handled yourself well at the docks, but lets's see what you can really do. Maybe this old dog can teach you a few tricks.

(The two begin to spare. AI expects to dominate, but is quickly thwarted. )

Not bad. Let's see how you handle this...

(AI launches a serious attack, with a short series of thrusts and parries.)

Not bad at all, but...

(He launches a combination that SHOULD disarm her, but SHIH parries and whacks AI in the butt.)

SHIH

Come on, Ai! Some tricks!

CHENG AI

Indeed. But don't let a foe get too close--

(He grabs SHIH in a bear hug. She gets free and clouts him in the expected spot. AI is stunned)

That's....VERY good.

SHIH

(tousling AI's hair affectionately)

Learned THAT dealing with grabby louts demanding free samples.

CHENG AI

Point taken. But..if your opponent sizes you up correctly and treats you with respect. Do you have the stamina for a long fight with no quick ending?

SHIH

Let's see...

(The two slowly circle, in challenge... or courtship? Thrust/punch. Block/parry. It builds to a climax as CHENG gets his blade across SHIH's throat)

CHENG AI

Hard fought, but--

SHIH

Check below.

(Her blade is against CHENG's crotch)

CHENG AI

That...was a workout.

SHIH

And...?

CHENG AI

You handle yourself well. Still--

SHIH

---Could use a little work. Perhaps...with a younger, faster blade?

CHENG AI

Hmph. Perhaps you do.

(Ouch)

And perhaps you need instruction in another area.

(He turns to leave, then turns around)

Few have bested me in the fleet.

(Exits. Beat)

SHIH

(realizing)

Ai, wait, I didn't--

(stops)

No. Why should I care? He's just...a man.

(Lights dim as SHIH worries on this as she goes to bed. She drifts off to sleep and she mutters in her dreams)

SHIH

Just a man. Just a man. Just...a man.

(As SHIH is about to drop off, lights on WU as Auntie)

WU

What troubles you, young daughter?

SHIH

It's nothing...

WU

You cannot fool an elder! It's plain you worry over a man, hm?

(SHIH sulks a bit and WU laughs)

I'm sorry, but it's so clear! The oldest story in the world. You'll laugh, too, after knowing more men!

SHIH

Ai-yah! This isn't a matter to discuss with elders!

WU

I tease--oh, I see. You've known far too MANY men.  
(SHIH sulks some more)  
Young daughter, elders know more than you think. And understand even more.

SHIH

I took no pride in doing it. But--

WU

You will not beg forgiveness because you did it to survive.

SHIH

I know I should. I should have died before dishonoring the family name. But...Xi.

WU

Your--  
(thinking quickly)  
---Sister. You did it for her.

SHIH

Yes.

WU

Oh, young daughter. I would hold and comfort you, if I could. You had no good choices. But without your actions, there would be no family. And the ancestors would wither from that lack.

SHIH

I know. I know. But...I swallowed so much shame!

WU

And some nights, choked on the bile. I have drunk deeply from that cup, too.

SHIH

You understand. But--how do you reclaim your honor? Restore the family name?

WU

Not easily. Not quickly. But like...the journey of a thousand miles. Put one foot in front of the other. And go on. And on. Push through...to the other side.

SHIH

The other side?



WU

To...your life.

(Beat)

You do NOT need a man to get there. Your own strength is sufficient. You ARE strong.

SHIH

Yes. Yes, I am...

WU

And your current problem...an older man, is it not? With power and influence?

SHIH

How did you--

WU

No lesser man would give YOU problems.

SHIH

He has a son, an adopted son who's grown--

WU

That is your solution! Divide them. Play one against the other. Let them waste their energy against each other. While YOU remain in control!

SHIH

Isn't that a bit...

WU

Cruel? The world is cruel. Do what you must to survive. For the family.

SHIH

I...I will think about that, Aunty. Thank you.

WU

What is an ancestor for?

(Comforted, SHIH sleeps. Lights dim on her, as lights come up on WU.)

I have bound her tighter to me. Good. Very good. An ally is better than a pawn.

(WU sighs)

But I should not like her. I must remember. The needs of China, above all.

(Lights fade on a pensive WU)

ACT I, SCENE 5

(Danchang Harbor. PAO address a group.  
PAO and SHIH are merchants, the others  
as laborers and farmers.)

PAO

The usual. Keep your wits, gather information. NO  
PETTY THIEVERY.

ZHONG

Aw, that's no fun.

PAO

Time for loot later. Now, go! Shih, you're with me.

(The group disperses.)

SHIH

The younger, faster blade? Not what I anticipated.

PAO

Not all blades are physical. Beginners should be wary;  
they can be sharper than expected.

(CUSTOMS official enters)

CUSTOMS OFFICIAL

Your business?

PAO

Our cargo's been inspected. But I'm showing my bride  
the city. She's never been to Danchang.

SHIH

Tee-hee!

PAO

Though I would want to know about my competitor's  
cargo? The White Jade Company?  
(slips him money)

CUSTOMS OFFICIAL

A couple of their ships just left.

PAO

(peeling off more bills)  
Business good for them, eh?

CUSTOMS OFFICIAL

Not the only ones they have out there, so, yes.

PAO

You've given me a boon, sir!

(The CUSTOMS OFFICIAL leaves. PAO and SHIH continue their walk)

SHIH  
Spending money to make money?  
(PAO shrugs)  
Because intelligence is as powerful as cannons.

PAO  
Your own blade is quite sharp.

SHIH  
A pity Ai isn't here to direct this...

PAO  
Not with that price on his head...

SHIH  
HE'D pretend to be delighted to be with me.

(Reluctantly, PAO moves closer to SHIH.)

SHIH  
Pao, Pao, Pao...play your part! Do what a gentleman does when showing his lady the sights of Danchang.  
(As she speaks, she moves one arm around a breast)

PAO  
Really...?

SHIH  
You MUST get intimate.  
(places his hands on her bottom)  
I am QUITE used to having men handling my ass.

PAO  
Even a potential stepson?

SHIH  
I've been asked to play many roles in my life; evil, alluring stepmother is far from unusual.

PAO  
You...are cheeky.

SHIH  
Returning cheek to cheek. Does that bother you?

PAO  
N-no....

SHIH

Your mouth says no, your eyes say yes...  
(plants a big one on his lips)

PAO

Mistress Shih! You-you--  
(realization dawns)  
--Are keeping me off balance. Unsettled. Very shrewd.  
But a dangerous way to live.

SHIH

Does that mean you're handling me carefully?

PAO

Watching you carefully. It's not an accident that  
you're with me.

SHIH

Testing me for Ai? Or yourself? Or both?

PAO

You figure that out.

SHIH

I'd be disappointed if it wasn't both.  
(notices offstage guard)  
We have an audience again.

PAO

Let's distract them.  
(PAO kisses SHIH passionately)

SHIH

You ARE quick.

PAO

I AM second in command. Who salutes someone who seizes  
the initiative so effortlessly.

SHIH

Flatterer. You enjoy this, too.

PAO

I'm not your stepson yet. And I'm still a male.

SHIH

Is that big blue boat of interest for us?

PAO

As in treasure? Only if you like fireworks. It's for  
Hunan Province and their festival for Gwangung.

SHIH

The god of warriors, writers and prostitutes must have his tribute!

(relaxing)

The bystanders are satisfied.

PAO

The fleet isn't. They mutter you've bewitched the captain with your feminine charms.

SHIH

Of course I have. That's how women get husbands.

PAO

They also mutter you'll ensorcel the rest of the fleet with those same charms.

SHIH

Really? Multiple partners? I charge a MUCH higher price for that.

PAO

They see you flit from officer to officer, bending their wills to yours.

SHIH

Seeing who's an ally...or an enemy. Perfectly logical.

PAO

For a man, yes. From a woman...witchcraft! Your battleground befuddles them.

SHIH

They fear me that much?

They don't know what to make of you. Friend? Or foe?

SHIH

Is this another reason you teamed yourself with me?

PAO

I am very efficient.

SHIH

I don't know whether I'm ally or foe, because I don't know who I should be friend or foe >T0<.

PAO

Which is why you sought me out tonight?

SHIH

As I said, I'm logical.

PAO

The fleet wonders what they're getting in the captain's potential wife

SHIH

The potential wife wonders what she's getting in her new potential fleet.

PAO

Everyone needs knowledge.

SHIH

Particularly...will Cheng Ai have an heir with her.

PAO

Adopted sons think about that much.

SHIH

We come to the heart of it.

(PAO shrugs)

Ironic. For a long time, I knew I had no inheritance. Yet, now I impact others'.

PAO

The gods have a lousy sense of humor.

SHIH

I know.

(Chuckles silently, flexing her hands)

I've upset many plans coming onto the scene, then?

PAO

You make fleet politics...interesting.

SHIH

Let's make them even more interesting. The fleet assumes I will, in due course, marry Cheng Ai. But that is not HIS decision. It's mine.

PAO

What?

SHIH

I have Cheng Ai's blessing. He challenged me to find a better deal. I intend to find the best one I can get.

PAO

You ENJOY spitting in the tiger's eye.

SHIH

Weighing my options. Don't rule yourself out.

PAO

I cannot tell if you're serious or you're being cheeky again.

SHIH

You ARE a good kisser.

PAO

Is that a professional judgement or a strategic one?

SHIH

Share EITHER observation with the rest of the fleet. It's much too juicy to keep to yourself.

PAO

You're as saucy a wench the fleet has ever seen.

SHIH

Thank you.

PAO

Your sense of humor is...exquisite.

(SHIH just smiles. PAO gets cagey)

Perhaps...I should discuss this with your sister. Who is as beautiful and as gracious as you are crafty.

SHIH

(ow. a hit)

Thank you again for the compliment.

PAO

You are very much welcome. Let's get back. We have gathered much information.

(Lights shifts to WU, surrounded by figures shrouded in darkness)

WU

The trail goes warmer for me...and my agents.

(glances at the figures)

A hank of forelock. A fingernail clipping. A drop of blood. This makes you mine.

(WU grins)

But our purposes are aligned, are they not? What you want is what I want. So.

(hands out her talismans)

Take my talisman, so I may learn what you see. You shall deliver Tai Yu's chosen one to me!

(Lights out)

ACT I, SCENE 6

(Back at the Ning Pah, PAO leads SHIH and the rest)

CHENG AI

Pao, tell me something interesting!

PAO

Feeling a little hemmed in on the ship?

CHENG AI

Pao, REPORT!

PAO

Oh, Father-Captain, SOMETHING has stirred people up; many questions asked, few answers in return.

CHENG AI

On the lookout for something? Or someone?

PAO

Not clear enough for us to be sure.

CHENG AI

Anything juicy about to shove off?

PAO

Jewelry ship to Vietnam. To set sail in another week.

CHENG AI

Good, good...something meaty and concentrated. And how was working with...

SHIH

She did just FINE. She enjoyed working with younger, faster blades.

CHENG AI

Hmph.

PAO

She was VERY helpful, sir. We came to the same conclusions after getting everyone's reports. She has a knack for intelligence.

CHENG AI

We'll see if that's the best use for her--

SHIH

Don't like me teaming up with your son? Thought you said I should shop around.



CHENG AI

Focus on the job at hand.

SHIH

I like having fun while I work. You know THAT!

CHENG AI

You ARE a novice. We don't know how capable you are.

SHIH

I'm capable of much. I want more. Don't treat me like a newborn.

CHENG AI

It's almost frightening how quickly you learn.

SHIH

Make you uneasy, Cheng Ai?

CHENG AI

(too quickly)

No. Not at all!

SHIH

And why are you not teaching me the ways of command?

CHENG AI

Enough. Let me rethink my plans for you.

SHIH

I still want--

CHENG AI

I said, ENOUGH.

SHIH

But--Yes, sir.

(SHIH salutes CHENG AI and departs for her quarters where she runs into XI)

XI

You're back! And you are well!

(hugs SHIH)

And Cheng Pao? Is he--

SHIH

We were paired together, and yes, he's fine as well. Which is more than I can say about his idiot father.

XI

Oh. I see. Did Pao...did he treat you well?

SHIH

Like a husband doting on a newlywed. I could get used to treatment like that.

XI

(shoulders slumping)

Oh. I see.

SHIH

What? No, I didn't mean---

XI

Of course. I must get to bed. Chores. Good night.

SHIH

Xi, you took that wrongly! I only meant--damn. It's my day to act the fool, isn't it?

(SHIH lays down for sleep, but tosses and turns restlessly. Lights up on WU as "Aunty")

WU

Young daughter...I sense your restlessness.

SHIH

Go away, auntie. I must sleep.

WU

You are frustrated. You will not sleep peacefully until you resolve this.

SHIH

I don't need this piled atop of all else.

WU

About your man...

(SHIH reacts)

Remember that you are in control, not them. Just a word here, a word there...

SHIH

I know, I know. But my heart isn't in this. It reminds me too much of...what I used to do.

WU

Oh. But...

SHIH

And...there are complications.

(beat)

My sister. She...likes one of them.

WU

You...could talk to her. Tell her. Let her know.

SHIH

Playing a game when her heart may be involved? It feels wrong. >I< feel wrong.

WU

She would understand....

SHIH

She's all I have left. All YOU have left. I wouldn't care if I lost the men's regard. But, Xi....

(Beat)

WU

My sister. I would have done anything for her.

(beat)

Whatever you do...it will be right. For the family.

SHIH

Thank you, aunty.

(SHIH goes to sleep. Light down on her)

WU

A sister. Like mine. The one I could not save.

(WU grimaces)

I should not visit this one so often. It is dangerous.

(WU laughs bitterly to YIN)

Do not say, "I told you so." Truth is indeed a weapon.

But it is a poor weapon that does not cut both ways.

(Lights fade out)

ACT I, SCENE 7

(Morning, several days later, on the  
*Ning-Pah*. SHIH is practicing solo.  
Some crew gather)

ZHONG

Captain's pretty pet...playing warrior!

PEI

Here we go again. Knock it off, Zhong.

ZHONG

What she gonna do about it? Spank me?

PEI

If that's your perversion...

ZHONG

The Captain LETS her do well.

PEI

Keep your mind on business, brother. Playing Master  
Tough Guy lost you Ling in the--

ZHONG

If I had a wife who looked like that, I'd let her play  
with my sword as much as she wants.

SHIH

(casually)

Take you up on that, Master Zhong. Shall we play?

(Before ZHONG can muster a reply, CHENG  
AI enters with LI HUANG)

CHENG AI

Zhong! Pei! Find your group!

ZHONG

Once you're pregnant, you'll trade your sword for  
diapers soon enough.

(ZHONG and PEI exits)

CHENG AI

Shih, meet one of my oldest friends and a fellow  
captain, Li Huang.

(LI HUANG grasps her hand, holding it  
slightly too long)

LI HUANG

I've heard so much about you, Mistress Shih...Ai's Dark Lady.

SHIH

(faintly repulsed)

Charmed.

LI HUANG

What mystery do you conceal? Can I pierce it and ascend to the Ninth Heaven myself?

CHENG AI

Huang normally has a fleet near Wuchuan. He just happened by as we were taking that merchant ship.

LI HUANG

Always glad to share the wind with Ai.

CHENG AI

Happy to see you, but...that ship's MINE.

LI HUANG

First sight, first crack. But lady...What sway do YOU have, to rise so far, so fast?

SHIH

About that raid, Ai, if I could lead a party--

CHENG AI

Already have a place for you. Huang and I still have some catching up to do while my boys get ready.

SHIH

But--

(Too late. CHENG AI and LI HUANG exit)

Damn.

(HUANG LING and XI interrupt her.)

XI

Let's rest for a bit. Ai-yah!

SHIH

Are you well?

XI

I'm fine, but I must build my wind up! Young Ling is very active! It took time for her to warm up, but...  
(XI tousles LING's hair)

SHIH

A pirate child, hm?

XI

Well....

LING

Was my uncle making fun of you earlier?

SHIH

My goodness. She speaks. Yes. Every day. I consider it part of my training.

LING

It doesn't bother you?

SHIH

No more than a gnat breaking wind!

(catches herself)

I'm sorry, Ling. I mean no disrespect to your uncle. He's still family even though he was mean to you

XI

We lost our parents when we were both young. It is important to have family.

SHIH

Because your uncle still has a chance to change.

(LING hesitates, then nods)

XI

You said you had a question for my sister?

LING

My friend Zhu said you were a prostitute in Guangzhou.

SHIH

Yes. But I'm learning to be part of Captain Cheng's crew now.

LING

Zhu's mother was a prostitute, too. She gives out sweets when I visit.

XI

Perhaps I should find some sweets...

SHIH

Borrow some from Zhu's mom?

LING

Zhu wants to grow up to be just like her. But I think I'd like to be...a pirate in Captain Cheng's fleet!

SHIH

Be whatever you dream to be---

LING

Can I use a sword and a gun?

SHIH

Even a sword and gun. But when you're ready for it.  
And you must practice, or you WON'T be ready. That's  
why I practice now. Understand?

(LING nods)

Good.

LING

Can I go off and watch the birds?

XI

Go ahead. But keep in sight.

(LING skips off. XI sighs.)

SHIH

You work miracles. I can't believe how she is now.

XI

I said we could save her, didn't I?

SHIH

You like her.

XI

So sweet...Wish she were mine...

SHIH

Is the crew...treating you well?

XI

They just want me to work! That feels...normal.  
There's someone without a foot, yet he's the hardest  
worker there!

SHIH

Good!

XI

There are women and children! I never knew that! Well  
fed...strong...happy! I've even seen babies!

SHIH

Xi...

XI

I've always wanted children and a big family. I gave  
that up after--after I was hurt, but to see so many...

SHIH

Xi...you can still fulfill that dream.

XI

What?

SHIH

You haven't noticed? Two, three men to every woman on board. More if you don't count the married ones.

XI

Don't tease me. No one could look at me that way.

(PAO enters with two muskets in hand)

PAO

Good morn to you, lovely ladies! The captain is sending raiders to the trade ship. Your duty is to defend the ship, so our target doesn't take hostages.

SHIH

Guard duty. How...fun.

PAO

(turns to XI)

And, young sister, may the gods and fortune guide your lovely hands! Perhaps I can visit Ling after the raid?

SHIH

And my sister, as well?

PAO

Found out! So I have permission? Excellent! Good day!  
(exits)

SHIH

No one can look at you--?

XI

He--he's just being friendly. And wants to help with Ling. Nothing more than that.

SHIH

In my professional opinion...

XI

Not another word!

(glances dubiously at her weapon)

How do I--

SHIH

You defend others. Children.

XI

Ahhh...

(grasps it more confidently)



SHIH

Does this change how you feel about Cheng Ai?

XI

He and his men are still pirates...

SHIH

Pirates with babies...

XI

Captain Cheng may be a good man--

SHIH

And Pao--

XI

But the rest of them? The ones without babies? How can I trust them? Will YOU tame their unruly nature?

SHIH

Not impossible...though a challenge.

(They are interrupted by cannon fire)

XI

They've begun. Should we--?

SHIH

Not yet. And don't change the subject.

XI

Don't change the fact these people live to rob.

SHIH

Better to be the robber than the robbee.

XI

I don't like living with low life like that.

SHIH

Like our neighbors, Chu the pickpocket and Hsao the leg breaker?

XI

We didn't have much choice back there!

SHIH

How many choices do we have here?

(Shouting from afar; the two crews  
clash. SHIH tenses then relaxes. Beat)

XI

These people WANT to fight and be pirates...

SHIH

Because they want to care for their families.

XI

Can't they do something else? For their children?

SHIH

You saw Captain Cheng with Ling. They cherish them.

XI

I don't know. I don't feel safe around them. And I don't like feeling helpless--

(An ATTACKER emerges onto the deck.  
SHIH tries to fire, but her gun jams.)

SHIH

Behind me!

(SHIH uses her blade to dispatch him as  
XI readies a potion from her robes)

HUANG LING

(appearing)

What's happening? Are they all gone?

XI

LING! GET AWAY!

(A second ATTACKER enters. As LING  
scrambles, XI throws a potion at the  
ATTACKER's feet As they choke, XI  
calmly use her musket to shoots them)

Ling, are you okay?

HUANG LING

I-I think so.

(hugs XI)

You saved me.

SHIH

You've practiced.

(XI shrugs)

That makes you formidable, Xi, not helpless.

(glances at LING)

And pirates respect one who protects their own.

(CHENG AI enters)

CHENG AI

Ten hells! What an ugly surprise. No riches, but a hold full of dog puke.

(Crewman bring in two prisoners, a  
European man and a European/hapa woman)

MALE PRISONER

*Tol' th' Cap'n it was bad luck to take on a wench. Now look at us!*

FEMALE PRISONER

*Tol' th' Cap'n we'd run aground if we had an addlepate for a first mate--now look at us!*

(The two glare at each other.)

PAO

An unruly bucket of puke. We think that's the first mate. That's a deck hand.

MALE PRISONER

*I'll not talk, ye bloody heathens!*

LI HUANG

Trash. Just dump them overboard.

FEMALE PRISONER

*Keep yer 'ands to yerself, bastard!*

PAO

The mate might tell us something. The other...

ZHONG

Well. Never had me a foreign devil...

SHIH AND CHENG AI

No.

LI HUANG

Come on, Ai. Might be interesting. Fun for the boys, at least.

CHENG AI

Sits poorly with me, Huang. Rape? Not what a strong man does.

SHIH

(nodding at ZHONG)

Do your men agree? It sounds like you don't have any guidelines about this. Bad for discipline.

CHENG AI

Hm.

(eyeing SHIH speculatively)

You have an idea for this...Crewman?

SHIH

Aye, sir!

(goes to FEMALE PRISONER)

SHIH (CONT'D)

You. Do you comprehend my words?

FEMALE PRISONER

Yes. My mother grew up around Beihai.

SHIH

Good. Understand, I do not like you. I despise your fellow crewmen. I am an orphan because of scum like them. But, as our prisoner... you will NOT be abused or molested. In any way. Is that clear?

FEMALE PRISONER

Thank you.

SHIH

(to the crew)

Is that clear to everyone else? If anyone touches her, without her consent...I WILL CUT OFF YOUR...HEAD. With Captain Cheng's blessings.

(to CHENG AI)

Satisfactory, Captain Cheng?

CHENG AI

Enthusiastic...but I like it. Sounds like policy. Pei, make it so. Now, about our other prisoner...

PAO

Obviously setting a trap.

CHENG AI

Tailored precisely for me.

PAO

But...this trap could be---

CHENG AI

--turned on the trapper? I intend that.

(turns to PRISONER)

So, dog, what do you have to say? Who are the snakes who've put a price on my head?

(PRISONER spits. ZHONG slugs him)

ZHONG

Treat the Captain with respect, barbarian!

PRISONER

*Do yer worse, Chinaman! Me lips are sealed!*

LI HUANG

Looks to be a tough nut to chew, Ai. Perhaps you should use...the Deck?

CHENG AI

Yes. The Deck.

(PRISONER abruptly becomes still. CHENG AI smiles unpleasantly)

So, tell me about your masters.

PRISONER

*Little! Very little! We worked through a middleman!  
Like always!*

CHENG AI

You've changed your song. You truly know nothing?

PRISONER

*I swear! I swear!*

CHENG AI

You seem convincing. But I must be sure.

(CHENG AI nods to ZHONG. PRISONER screams as they drag him off stage)

SHIH

The Deck?

CHENG AI

A tradition. To teach foes the error of their ways. We seize them. Blind them. Nail their hands and feet to the deck. Deny them food and water. And allow the sun and wind to take care of the rest.

SHIH

Is that...is that really necessary?

CHENG AI

The sea make men tough. Sometimes we need to crack the toughness. You think that's too cruel?

SHIH

I see the purpose.

CHENG AI

A captain must be able to strike first. Strike hard.

SHIH

It'd be a poor commander who couldn't do that.

CHENG AI

Could YOU do this?

SHIH

Ye-Yes. Yes.

CHENG AI  
We...shall see. Pao, anything else for me?

PAO  
He and the captain wore these...

(PAO brings out one of WU's talismans)

XI  
Ah! Beware!

SHIH  
What's wrong?

XI  
It reeks of dark magic. I learned of it in Guangzhou.  
It's nothing to trifle with.

PAO  
This bauble? Pretty, but it seems---  
(He touches it directly)

AHHHHH!  
(PAO has a seizure as WU appears as a  
ghostly presence...)

WU  
WHO...DARES!  
(She tries to detect who has her  
talisman)  
SOMEONE UNKNOWN TO ME HAS MY TALISMAN. SUCH HUBRIS!  
SOMEONE SHALL PAY!  
(WU's demeanor changes)  
WHAT?!!...CAN IT BE? THEY'VE FOUND---Young daughter?

SHIH  
Auntie...?

XI  
TOUCH IT NOT!  
(XI knocks the talisman away from PAO,  
who recovers. WU disappears.)

CHENG AI  
Pao, are you OK???

PAO  
Yes. I think.

XI  
Talismans like this were used by the darkest, foulest  
sorcerers to steal men's souls.

PAO  
Indeed?? Then I'm indebted to you. I--  
(he sways)

XI  
Let me look at you!  
(looks at him closely)  
You to get to the healers.

PAO  
(leaning on XI)  
Yes, please!  
  
(XI helps PAO off stage)

CHENG AI  
This is unexpected.

SHIH  
(shivers)  
Magic.

CHENG AI  
I thought foreigners were behind this. But they'd send  
navies, not set ambushes with random rogues.

SHIH  
And no barbarian would use a sorcerer. Maybe Imperial  
bureaucrats? Working through a Merchant House?

CHENG AI  
The Houses would LOVE to be rid of me. And every  
foreign sailor is assigned to a House in Guangzhou...  
Fah. I smell the stink of imperial corruption!

SHIH  
I know a merchant with foreign sailors...

CHENG AI  
There may be more; we must know! We must go to  
Guangzhou!

(Lights shift to WU)

WU  
She has shown herself! I have found Tai Yu's Chosen  
One! And soon, her destiny will be MY destiny...China  
shall once again rule supreme!

(BLACKOUT. END OF ACT I)

ACT II, SCENE 1

(Deck of the NING-PAH)

SHIH

Danger looms for us! We must meet it head on! This isn't my first excursion, my wits have been a boon for you.

CHENG AI

They have, but--

SHIH

We need every eye, every arm, every mind out there looking for who's behind all this!

CHENG AI

Which is why I AM sending you out there---you DO have some of our keenest wits.

SHIH

With Pao as a nursemaid, when he can barely stand up!

CHENG AI

Which shows how dire our situation is--would I risk both of you otherwise?

SHIH

I'm not a nightingale to be kept in a golden cage!

CHENG AI

No, I put my two best heads into the field to find information we need...and they need to be together!

SHIH

I can find it quicker and faster if I were on my own. Or, better yet---

CHENG AI

--Command a squad of your own? No. You're too young and too green.

SHIH

You're keeping me small and hobbled, when I could race the wind and touch the stars!

CHENG AI

There is a time and place---

SHIH

And THIS is it! You're tied to the ship because of the bounty. Pao's wits are addled by magic! Is the fearsome Cheng Ai so terrified of a woman in charge that he'd jeopardize his entire fleet?



CHENG AI

You dare--!

SHIH

Do you fear what I COULD become? To grow beyond what you're comfortable with? Beyond what you could control?

CHENG AI

Of--of course not.

SHIH

At least pair me with a hand like Pei and---

CHENG AI

NO. And I mean it.

(beat)

You hunger to lead. It's a fire you keep banked like a hidden dragon, ready to blaze like the sun...but THE HOUR IS NOT NOW.

(slams his fist onto his desk)

SHIH

When? When WILL it?

CHENG AI

Eventually. Soon. But that takes time...which WE DO NOT HAVE.

(SHIH strangles a frustrated sigh)

Go with Pao. Find information. THAT is your captain commanding.

SHIH

Yes, sir, my Captain-Teacher. I will comply.

(She turns to leave, then stops)

But I am not a prize for your bed, saved for when the fight is done.

(SHIH exits. CHENG AI gazes after her)

CHENG AI

No, you're not a prize for the bed. You're the one who'll push back when no one else dares...and now... THAT is the prize I want.

(Lights Fade)

ACT II, SCENE 2

(Below deck on the NING-PAH. SHIH sleeps restlessly.)

SHIH

Aunty? Was that you before us? What do you ask? Was that sorcery? I am confused. What path do you point out? Give me guidance, ancestor! Give me guidance!

(Suddenly she sits up)

Fah. Useless dreams.

(XI turns over and looks at SHIH)

XI

You were thrashing. What's wrong?

SHIH

Nothing. Not sleeping well.

XI

(nodding)

Sorcery upsets everyone.

SHIH

Are you...sure this is dark magic? And evil?

XI

The signs are clear.

SHIH

I thought it felt different. More...ancient. Like from our ancestors...

XI

Everything I've learned and every sense I have tells me it's sorcery. Be wary, if you're investigating.

(Grabs SHIH's hand)

Please, take care!

SHIH

(startled)

I-I will. You haven't slept, either. Have you been up, worrying?

XI

It doesn't do any good, but...

SHIH

Like old times.

(Beat)

XI

And...will Pao be going out, as well?

SHIH

I'll be his partner again.

XI

They should have the sense to let him be and rest!  
Will you...will you protect him?

SHIH

Are you concerned? He's an able fighter. Why are you--  
(realization)  
You DO have feelings for Pao.

XI

Forget it. Forget I said anything. It's nothing.

SHIH

Not if you lose sleep over it.

XI

I said it was nothing! Go back to sleep. Rest.

(XI turns away, seemingly to sleep.  
SHIH knows better. Beat)

SHIH

Rest easy, Xi. YOU should sleep. Tomorrow, I'll see  
that no harm comes to Pao. I give you my vow.

(Beat. SHIH's hand finds its way to  
XI's. They squeeze. XI relaxes.)

(SHIH does not. But she holds XI's hand  
tightly as the lights fade.)

ACT II, SCENE 3

(Guangzhou Harbor, the next morning. A spy party of PAO, ZHONG, PEI and others have formed )

PAO

Business and only business on this. Information only. Vengeance is for later.

(Men grumble)

The Captain and I mean it. Go! We rendezvous at the far dock.

(Men break. SHIH sets a furious pace)

SHIH

Come. I've been to Jin Guang's home. Let's go.

PAO

You argued with Ai, hm?

SHIH

If he isn't involved with the attacks on Ai, he may know who is.

PAO

It's written in your bones.

SHIH

I can persuade him to tell us--

(PAO groans in pain)

You push too hard!

PAO

So kind of you to notice.

SHIH

Ai-yah. So wrapped up in my own world, I don't notice others' troubles.

PAO

Oh, it's amusing enough. Like watching a dragon challenging a tiger.

SHIH

What?

PAO

The rest of us duck the flailing limbs and watch for flying bodies. Fine sport.

(he stifles a groan.)

SHIH

Are you well enough to be on your feet?

PAO

Yes, thanks to your sister. But I need to be here.  
(glances at SHIH)  
He got your teeth grinding, didn't he?

SHIH

He means well, but I need to grow!

PAO

And perchance...take command?

SHIH

It's crossed my mind...

PAO

(shrugs)  
Well, the fruits become ripe in its own time...

SHIH

Yes, yes, yes...that's what Ai says all the time.

PAO

He's not wrong. You've the makings of a fine pirate.  
Maybe a leader...but that needs tempering and honing.

SHIH

Which takes...time?  
(PAO nods)  
ARGH.

PAO

He also says the true leaders seize the opportunity to  
do so before others even recognize it exists.  
(SHIH perks up at this)  
Think about that.

SHIH

I will.  
(Beat. She takes a deep breath)  
Before we go further, I must clear the air. You...hold  
my sister's heart. Does she hold yours?

PAO

What-what makes you think--

SHIH

Maybe it's the looks you give each other...or the way  
you turn to mush when the other passes.

PAO

I do not turn to mush--

SHIH

She does--and she's terrible at hiding it.

PAO

I've acted totally honorably around her--!

SHIH

You'd cement your place in the fleet if you wed the sister of the captain's bride.

PAO

Very calculating. It'd be hard to kick YOU out if I woo your sister.

SHIH

So...a game of the heart? Or politics?

PAO

Satisfying both my heart AND my head is no sin. It's...efficient. You have the same motive.

SHIH

Yes. Yes, I do. I want my sister to be happy.

PAO

As do I.

(beat)

People with shared interests make good allies.

SHIH

Yes, they do.

(Beat)

I don't want to play evil stepmother. Just...be good to Xi.

PAO

Thank you.

SHIH

But...I AM an older sister. A mother-in-law's wrath pales next to ours. Cross me at your peril!

PAO

Warning noted.

SHIH

This is Jin Guang's residence. We can...

(she trails off)

Something's wrong.

PAO

No guards. No servants.

(The two draw swords. Suddenly, JIN GUANG appears at a doorway)

SHIH  
Jin Guang, what's happening?

JIN GUANG  
I...I...

PAO  
Are you well, honored merchant?

JIN GUANG  
I--

SHIH  
Do you need help?

(Abruptly, JIN GUANG collapses, a knife protruding from his back. SHIH and PAO glance at each other)

SHIH AND PAO  
Ambush.

(Two attackers burst in to attack. SHIH easily bests her foe. PAO has more trouble, and has to kill his.)

PAO  
As I always said, sometimes you have to become bait to smoke out the information you want.

SHIH  
Hard on the bait, isn't it?

(PAO goes to SHIH's captive)

PAO  
Unless you want your throat to grow a second mouth, please...be quiet.

(PAO rummages through his pockets, extracting a knife and a coin-filled pouch. He pounces on a scroll)

Oh ho! What do we have here?

SHIH  
You can read?

PAO  
You don't need much education to recognize your name...and your own face. Isn't that right, friend?

LOUT  
I'm not saying anything to you.

PAO  
We'll just see about that---  
(SHIH twists the LOUT's arm)  
TALK! Any more of you?

LOUT  
No, just us two! We thought you and the woman would be  
easy, unlike the others.

SHIH  
They're in danger!  
(to LOUT)  
Am I right?

LOUT  
OWWW! Yes, at the dock!

SHIH  
We need to go!  
(Nodding to LOUT)  
Him?

PAO  
(stabbing LOUT)  
Taken care of.

(The pair urgently race to the dock. As  
they hear scattered fighting, they  
stop. A group of bandits appear across  
the stage from them.)

SHIH  
There's Zhong and Pei...

PAO  
But pinned down.

(Lights switch over to PEI and ZHONG)

ZHONG  
We're fucked.

PEI  
They herded us here. Blind alley. We stick our noses  
out and they'll fill it with lead and steel.

ZHONG  
Outmanned, outgunned, out-thought. Bad habit for us.

PEI  
A habit they'll break FOR us.

(Lights back to PAO and SHIH)



PAO  
Wish we knew who we're dealing with, if it isn't  
foreigners or Imperials?

SHIH  
Save that for later. Anything we can do NOW?

PAO  
Anything we tried would be risky. The Captain would be  
unhappy if his bride to be was injured.

SHIH  
I think the Captain would be furious if he lost any of  
his GOOD MEN!

PAO  
We should be careful--

SHIH  
All come back...or NONE come back.

(beat)

PAO  
The moment...is yours.

(Back to PEI and ZHONG)

ZHONG  
They could take us any time. What're they waiting for?

PEI  
For Pao and Shih. To get us all.

ZHONG  
Ten hells.

(beat)  
Well, if we go down, we'll go out like heroes...like  
the Yan and Yellow Emperor! Or Liú Bèi and Zhū Liàng!

PEI  
More like the Cowherd and the Weaver Girl.

ZHONG  
Hah. If we gotta go, I'm glad it's with you.  
(beat)  
Pao's got the luck. He can get his butt and the  
shapely ass of the Captain's wench out of here and--

PEI  
Is...is that them I see over there?

ZHONG  
What? No, you fools! Run away! Run away!

(Back to PAO and SHIH)

PAO

We need some breathing room, some time...

SHIH

A distraction...

(Searches for something)

That blue boat? Is that the same one from Danchang?

PAO

Oh. OH.

SHIH

Gwangung loves his bang bangs, doesn't he?

PAO

We'd get spotted immediately.

SHIH

Maybe you. But a drunk whore?

(PAO nods and takes off. SHIH waits a beat and then lurches across stage)

WHAT KIND O'LADY DO YOU TAKE ME FOR?? Pour cheap wine into me, take me to the "quiet" parts of town? Alone?? For what??? I'm on to you, scoundrel!!

(She stumbles into one of the bandits)

You look like you'd treat a lady well! How about it?

BANDIT

We're busy here. If you could just--

SHIH

(drunkenly)

Sure, but I'm a bit lost. Can you direct me to the--

(She wretches and swoons. As he fumbles with her, SHIH snatches his dagger and stabs him. Beat. Fireworks! With the distraction and chaos, PAO and the others emerge to rout their foes)

PAO

Prisoner! Make sure we have a prisoner! Yes, the one with the talisman!

ZHONG

Pao! You sly SOB! We thought we were goners!

PEI

Brilliant plan! Absolutely brilliant!

PAO

Not me...it was Shih! Walking into the vipers' nest, alone and unarmed.

PEI  
The Captain's Dark Lady, indeed!

ZHONG  
I should--

(BOOM! A late explosion rocks the  
docks...a fireball heads straight for  
SHIH...but ZHONG shoves her out of the  
way, and takes the hit himself)

PAO  
He's hit! He's hit! He's on fire!

PEI  
Smother the flames!

PAO  
Get everyone back to the ship! We have a chance to  
save him there!

SHIH  
No. NO. NOOOOOO!

(Blackout))

ACT II, SCENE 4

(NING-PAH deck. PAO and the landing party spill onto deck)

PAO  
We have wounded! Healers! Healers!

PEI  
(To prisoner)  
Come on, you! We need answers!

PAO  
DON'T touch that talisman!

PEI  
Not me! Get Zhong first!

CHENG AI  
PAAAOOO! Where's Shih! Report!

PAO  
She's fine, she's rear guard!

PEI  
I said I was OK! Zhong needs the help!

(The commotion ad lib then moves on. A dejected SHIH clambers onboard.)

CHENG AI  
Shih! Are you OK?

SHIH  
Your men---they need you.

(He searches her eyes, then nods and exits. She finds a clear space to sit. XI comes over.)

XI  
Shih, are you OK??

SHIH  
No.

XI  
WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU? Are you wounded?!

SHIH  
I'm not injured.

XI  
What's going on?

SHIH

I killed him, Xi. I killed him.

XI

What?! Nobody's dead--not yet, anyway. Did something hit your head? Are you sure you're not hurt?

SHIH

I thought I was soooo clever. I would save everybody and prove myself. But now--

XI

Easy, now, Shih....

SHIH

My stupid, selfish antics got him hurt!

XI

No, Shih, no...Pao said you saved a lot of sailors--

SHIH

And lost one through my foolishness! I should have died instead!

(XI holds her. PAO & CHENG AI enter)

PAO

Shih. The men want to speak to you.

SHIH

I--I don't know if I can--

(CHENG AI cocks his head at her)

Yes. Yes, I suppose I must.

(They go to PEI, who holds vigil over an unconscious ZHONG)

PEI

Thank you, Mistress Shih, for honoring Zhong.

SHIH

I am so, so sorry to have caused his death.

PEI

What? No!

SHIH

It was my recklessness that hurt him. His ghost will haunt me forever.

PEI

He will guard you and yours for eternity. We would have been dead without you. You know that.

SHIH

Zhong is being taken before his time---

PEI

I was his friend, but Zhong...had his faults. The time may have come to start over and work off his debt.

SHIH

But--

(ZHONG groans and all come to him.)

SHIH

Why?

ZHONG

Couldn't let the Captain's woman get herself killed.

SHIH

You never liked me...

ZHONG

If a woman could grasp opportunity when it stares her in the face, an old sea hand like me can do the same.  
(coughs)

SHIH

The sea is cruel to the soft AND the strong, Zhong...

ZHONG

I've grabbed for glory. Heh. Harder than it looks...  
(takes SHIH's arm)

Thank you. For Ling. Even an oaf like me can see what you've done.

(Before SHIH can respond, LING enters)

LING

Uncle Zhong...?

ZHONG

Ling...I've been a bad uncle to you. And I regret I won't be able to make it up to you.

LING

No....

ZHONG

Mistress Shih, Xi? Watch over my niece. Teach her to live with a heart as large as yours.  
(SHIH and XI nod)

LING

Uncle Zhong, don't leave me alone.

(XI puts a hand on LING's shoulder)

XI

You won't be alone. We'll be with you.

(All embrace, as LING weeps silently.  
After a bit, SHIH turns LING to ZHONG)

SHIH

Your uncle doesn't have much time.

(LING nods. SHIH straightens up, and is  
met by PEI)

PEI

We meant what we said earlier. Our lives ARE yours.

(The men pass and salute her. SHIH is  
stunned. She goes to the side, gazing  
seaward. Time passes. CHENG AI enters.)

CHENG AI

We've finished interrogations.

SHIH

And...?

CHENG AI

Another pirate was behind this. Couldn't beat me on  
the open seas, so he had to cheat.

(SHIH gives a questioning glance)  
If it wasn't foreigners, and it wasn't Imperials or  
merchants...who's left?

SHIH

What will you do?

CHENG AI

Flush them out. I was planning a meeting of the fleets  
anyway...now I have TWO items on the agenda.

(SHIH nods, then turns away to look at  
the ocean)  
Dawn's not far away. You should come in and sleep.

SHIH

I'm not sleepy.

CHENG AI

Rest. You did well. We got information. You saved  
lives.

SHIH

One died.

CHENG AI  
Ten lives for one is a good bargain.

SHIH  
It doesn't feel like it.

CHENG AI  
Because you feel responsibility for this man's death?  
(SHIH nods)  
Guess what. You are.  
(SHIH is startled)  
You aspire to command? First lesson: the Captain is  
ALWAYS responsible for what befalls your crew. ALWAYS.

SHIH  
That...is a hard lesson.

CHENG AI  
Life is a harsh teacher...harsher than me. If you take  
a command, men WILL die because of you. Accept that.  
Do not spend their lives foolishly.  
(SHIH nods)  
You will always remember lessons burnt in blood.

SHIH  
You've learned many lessons like this?

CHENG AI  
(nods)  
I'd hoped to spare you AND the men that, but...  
(shrug)  
Still have the urge to command?

SHIH  
Yes. No. I don't know.

CHENG AI  
Good. You don't jump to answer. You were eager before.  
Now...you know.

SHIH  
Lives literally in your hands...And you've done this  
for years...

CHENG AI  
The decisions are no easier now than in the beginning.

SHIH  
You feel pain.

CHENG AI  
With every step I take.



SHIH

Yet...you aspire to command more?

CHENG AI

That, too will bring more pain.

SHIH

It must be lonely to command.

CHENG AI

It is. It's death to one's soul and body to shoulder that burden alone.

SHIH

Ah.

(beat)

Stay with me.

(Silently AI sits across from SHIH)

In Guangzhou, I loved to gaze at the ocean. It was peaceful. Calm. The wide expanse and unbounded horizons where a person could sail forever.

CHENG AI

The promise of freedom.

SHIH

You do understand.

(SHIH leans just a little bit closer to AI in the silence.)

You're a man of your word. You've not pressed me about marriage. Not even a hint about setting a date.

CHENG AI

I've teased.

SHIH

But we both know you weren't serious. Why?

(pause)

CHENG AI

Once...I would've pressed. I'd have pounced upon your love and seized it, like a ship to be plundered.

(SHIH motions encouragingly)

Once upon a time, there was a brash young pirate, new to his captaincy. There was no ship he couldn't take, no man he couldn't fight, no woman he couldn't woo. Then, one day, this swaggering swain...met his match.

SHIH

Your first love.

CHENG AI

She was grace incarnate, a dream of heaven in human form. Neither intimidated by my reputation, nor enthralled by my profession...she simply loved me.

SHIH

But...

CHENG AI

Her father unaccountably disapproved of me. Pirates were below thieves and beggars...below even actors! He wouldn't want his daughter to wed such a low life!

SHIH

What happened next?

CHENG AI

Caught between her father's wishes and her heart's desires, my beloved began to wither. She was torn by two loves...and unable to choose between them.

SHIH

What did you do?

CHENG AI

I broke the deadlock. If she couldn't decide between the two of us, I'd decide for her. So one dark night, I stole her away for an elopement.

SHIH

I take it that it didn't go well?

CHENG AI

I never considered she might've loved her father as much as she did me. Days passed. She began staring over the horizon, pining for home. I was determined to win her back. So every night, I romanced her to show my mighty love.

SHIH

How did that work?

CHENG AI

Very well...up until the night she threw herself overboard and drowned herself.

SHIH

Ai!

CHENG AI

Even after all these years...

(beat)

But it's prepared me. For you. To understand you and to give you my patience.

SHIH

I never demanded understanding. Or patience.

CHENG AI

Hush. In Guangzhou, you struggled every day. You sold your body to survive. Here? You can CHOOSE to give your love...or not. It's not a power to give up lightly. I never believed in Yueh Lao, before, but...

SHIH

You think that senile old love god made us a match?

CHENG AI

In the corner of my eye, I sometimes see a red thread. Stretching from here--

(pointing at his heart)

--to there.

(pointing to SHIH's heart)

I can wait until you're ready to answer.

SHIH

Even if the answer is no?

CHENG AI

Even if the answer is "No." And...you choose another.

SHIH

But you could always marry someone else!

CHENG AI

Other men would. Me? I've already lived alone for more years than I have left. I'll manage.

SHIH

I...I don't know what to say.

AI

Say nothing. Just enjoy the ocean. I can enjoy the moon...and sit quietly with you.

(Through this, SHIH and AI have crept closer together. Finally, she leans against AI and curls up to sleep. They stay that way until lights fade)

ACT II, SCENE 5

(On the deck of the NING-PAH,  
weeks later.)

SAILOR (O.S.)

Captain Lao's crew coming aboard.

(AI nods. SHIH enters as other pirate  
chiefs climb aboard)

SHIH

A "Great Convening" of pirate ships. It seems...  
momentous. Does it happen often?

CHENG AI

Once in my captaincy. Twice in my father's. For big,  
important matters. And a grand union of all the pirate  
fleets in the China Seas is big.

SHIH

You've planned this for a long time.

CHENG AI

And I'm not allowing a price on my head to get in they  
way. Always thought it was an idle dream...until you  
encourage me to dream bigger.

SHIH

Diplomacy, Ai, diplomacy.

CHENG AI

Heh. I promise. No indiscriminate cracking of heads.  
Only the one who needs it.

SHIH

Good. I think.

CHENG AI

With this much at stake? Petty rivalries won't  
distract me.

(signals to PAO, who comes over)

Sending hospitality to the other ships?

PAO

Going out now. With sailors keeping their ears open  
and asking a few questions.

SHIH

Looking for the one who put a price on your head.

(CHENG AI grins wolfishly)

You're calm.

CHENG AI

A panther stalks, not wasting energy to growl or roar.  
(glances to SHIH)  
You can stalk, too. Look for a better deal.

SHIH

Despite your red thread...

AI

BECAUSE of it. In the end...your happiness is my happiness.

SHIH

I-I think I want to know who would be your foe.

CHENG AI

(amused by this deflection)  
Let me tell you about them, then...

(As AI begins to brief SHIH, a long, slow eerie sound fills the stage.)

WU (o.s.)

Gods of the sky and wind,  
Lend wings to my spirit,  
Vision and knowing become one!

(Lights turns the set otherworldly. WU enters, with jade staff)

WU

Yes. Tai Yu's hand lies heavily on this place. The future of China runs through here.

(WU's staff slowly seeks here and there..it wobbles near CHENG AI)

And Cheng Ai, the infamous pirate! In the midst of it! Little wonder he is NEAR the center of destiny...But NOT at it. Poor man...

(She cackles. She turns to SHIH)

Here is the center. Long have I sought you, young daughter, and now you are so close.

(Considers her)

Girl become woman. With spirit. Capable of mastering destiny's demands. But not yet fully in command of her power. So strong and beautiful..,

(WU is wistful. XI becomes aware of WU, but neither actually sees the other)

I will be gentle with her...but I do what I must. My agents will gather her for me.

(She exits. XI wonders what she's seen. Lights and sound return to normal. AI addresses the assembled captains.)

CHENG AI

Dogs of the sea! It is time we band together, under one flag! It only makes sense!

LAO YU

But only a captain commands his fleet and his men! He dips his sail to no one! That only makes sense!

CHENG AI

But are there no problems too big for any single captain or fleet?

LAO YU

We managed well enough before.

CHENG AI

But can we continue to do so? The foreign devils are comin' to our ports and sailing' our lanes, and they bring weapons that outgun and outrange us!  
(Crowd murmurs agreement)

LI HUANG

Truth to that.

LAO YU

So? They're just foreigners...We avoid 'em!

CHENG AI

And run like dogs?  
(Crowd gets loud)  
No, we face them like men!

LAO YU

Still, with superior range...

CHENG AI

We fight! With our numbers and our wits!  
(Crowd gets louder in agreement)

LAO YU

Who's supplying the wits? You?

CHENG AI

Why not? My fleet's big enough not to be afraid. But ALL will stand tall if we stand behind each other!

LAO YU

Bringing two captains together under one roof leads to trouble; what do you do with ten? Twenty? More?

CHENG AI

We're clever men; we figure it out. Better to share a bigger pot than to lose it all squabbling among ourselves!

LAO YU

What about the emperor?

CHENG AI

What about the emperor? His lackeys are too busy counting bribe money to fight! Hell, we'd do a better job running China in our sleep!

(Crowd gets even louder, laughing)

We join together, we all laugh at the Imperials AND the foreigners! We'd be a power in our own right!

LI HUANG

Cheng Ai is right! He fears no one! If we band together, we can be the same! He's shown us the way! He's the one to lead us!

CROWD

Yes, yes, Cheng Ai!

CHENG AI

We band together to fight off the imperials and foreigner, who knows what else we can do! Dream big!

LI HUANG

Cheng Ai! Cheng Ai! Cheng Ai!

(Crown begins to chant CHENG AI's name and he takes it in)

SHIH

Thunder with one hand and lightning with the other.

CHENG AI

Exciting the crowd is easy; haggling with their captains is harder.

SHIH

Are they trustworthy?

CHENG AI

Ten hells, no! But fleet politics is better than assassins.

SHIH

But if one of them ordered you killed...

CHENG AI

Keep enemies close, friends closer; makes it harder to plot violence against each other. Now...we haggle.

(AI heads to his cabin. LI HUANG worries SHIH. Something she can't put her finger on.)

SHIH

There's something about Li Huang...

CHENG AI

I said we go back a long way.

SHIH

He doesn't...court very well.

CHENG AI

Hah! Thinks he's a real ladies' man...but other than that, I can count on him.

SHIH

Still, I...never mind.

(SHIH shakes her head, XI approaches  
and hands her a vial)

SHIH

What is this? It looks foul.

XI

Something to block dark magic. I THINK it will work.

SHIH

You THINK? And what do you--

XI

I know nothing. Just a feeling. But better safe than sorry.

(SHIH nods and takes the vial. Shift to  
AI's cabin. Time has passed, meetings  
held, as LAO YU prepares to leave.)

LAO YU

Can't say I like having to take orders...

CHENG AI

Still...

LAO YU

Your terms give a man a lot to think about.

CHENG AI

By all means, think. It's all I ask.

LAO YU

I'll give you an answer in the next two days.

(LAO YU exits)



SHIH

Fence sitter. He's not ready to commit.

CHENG AI

Some jump. Some stay back. Sometimes it takes just one action to bring them all aboard.

(LI HUANG raps on the door)

LI HUANG

You gave them a lot to talk about...

CHENG AI

It was everything we were dreaming about when we first took over. The opportunities!

LI HUANG

So glad to bask in your radiance again, Mistress Shih

(SHIH nods curtly)

CHENG AI

So, your judgement? I know what they tell ME, but what do YOU hear?

LI HUANG

(getting up and pacing)

Welllllll...There're some holdouts, mostly from outlying areas. But most see the sense in a Grand Fleet. The sticking point, of course, are the terms for joining. But in the end, they'll agree.

(At some point during this, LI HUANG surreptitiously locks the door.)

CHENG AI

Good, good. So, let's plan ahead. Anybody thinking THEY should be head of Grand Fleet instead of me?

LI HUANG

Lots of ships think, "Your idea, your headache." But you do have rivals.

CHENG AI

Like who?

LI HUANG

Lao Yu, of course; if he argued against Grand Fleet, he'd be honest running it--pick the guy who DOESN'T want the job. But there's surprising support gathering around Ming Fong.

CHENG AI

Any other dark horses?

LI HUANG  
Not really, it's all the usual candidates---

SHIH  
(alerted)  
AI!

(SHIH tackles LI HUANG as he slashes at AI. There is struggle for the knife, SHIH is knocked aside. AI wrests the knife away from LI HUANG---but takes a slash to his gut. LI HUANG stuns CHENG AI, and reveals WU's talisman)

LI HUANG  
Sorry, Ai. It'd have been cleaner if I had better assassins. Or if that ship ambush worked. Or many other things. But one way or another, there will be a Grand Fleet...with ME as its head.  
(He gets his sword. AI looks to SHIH)

CHENG AI  
Last chance for a better deal...

LI HUANG  
(considering SHIH)  
Your woman is a most becoming prize...

SHIH  
I am no man's prize.  
(SHIH draws her sword)  
And you will get to Cheng Ai over my dead body.

LI HUANG  
You want me to be impressed?

SHIH  
No. I want you to bleed.  
(LI HUANG sighs and engages SHIH. He is surprised by SHIH's parry. Engages and again repelled easily. And AGAIN)  
My turn.  
(SHIH shifts to offense to press LI HUANG HARD. We hear the sounds of destiny clearly.)

LI HUANG  
How-how is this possible?

SHIH  
Talk less. Bleed more.

LI HUANG

Stop, STOP! This isn't necessary! We don't have to fight! I can easily share power with you!

SHIH

With YOU? Never.

LI HUANG

You.. you--she-devil!

(A finishing combination disarms him)

SHIH

Now we end it.

(Lights up on WU)

WU

This...is...INTOLERABLE. I will not be thwarted by incompetents! China's destiny needs MY hand!

(Wu performs a dark incantation)

Spirits, I break the bindings  
Of the Jade Emperor!  
Do my bidding...Open a path to  
Tai Yu's Chosen One!

(Thunder. LI HUANG screams. He horribly becomes a puppet, dancing to the whims of WU. The dark energy/koken surges to the NING-PAH via the talisman and swarms SHIH)

SHIH

What in ten hells---?

(SHIH hacks at the dark energy/koken, which herd her to WU)

LI HUANG

It burns, it burns!

WU

Bring her to me....bring her!

(SHIH hacks at the dark energy, and seems to beat it off. But WU smiles)

Young daughter. Young daughter...come to me!

SHIH

What...Aunty...?

XI (O.S.)

(knocking at the door)

Shih! SHIH! What's going on!

SHIH

Aunty, I'm coming...

XI (O.S.)

There is dark magic in the air! Fight it! Fight it!

WU

Young daughter I call to you from dreams and blood to  
restore China's ascendancy!

XI (O.S.)

Shih! Listen to me!

WU

Young daughter, your ancestors call!

XI (O.S.)

Sorcery that seeks to bedevil and lie! Fight it!

SHIH

Aunt---NO! What was I doing??? You deceiving liar!

XI (O.S.)

Fight!

SHIH

But how? This is sorcery! How can steel fight--

SHIH AND XI

The ward!

(SHIH smears the ointment on her hands.  
She fights her way to LI HUANG and  
grasps the now shielded talisman)

WU

Wangmu's breath, I cannot see!

(SHIH rips it from LI HUANG's neck and  
shatters it to bits! The feedback  
strikes WU with agony)

My eyes!

(The dark energy swirls away. SHIH and  
LI HUANG are alone and utterly spent.  
There is pounding at the door.)

SHIH

On your knees, dog.

(She staggers and unlocks the door. XI  
and PAO enter)

Pao! Xi! Cheng Ai has been hurt!

PAO

What's going on, what's happened?

SHIH  
Get healers. Li Huang tried to kill us!

PAO  
Guards! Attend!

CHENG AI  
(groans groggily)  
Get that...turncoat!

SHIH  
Ai, lie down! Wait for the healer!  
(CHENG AI continues)  
Lie down, you fool! That's what a bed's for!

(AI collapses onto his bed, extra  
GUARDS enter to hold LI HUANG)

PEI  
What do we do with him, sir?

PAO  
He should be executed--

SHIH  
Yes. But with an audience.  
(AI starts to speak)  
Hush. I know what to do.  
(She kneels and kisses his forehead.  
Beat. What the heck. She gives him a  
full out passionate kiss)

AI  
Woman, if I knew it would take but a pinprick---

SHIH  
Rest! Pao...assemble the fleet captains.

PAO  
You look shaky. I don't know if they'd listen--

SHIH  
Do it.  
(She rises and slowly moves downstage.  
As she walks, the combined fleet  
assembles behind her to listen.)  
To the assembled flags of all who sail the China Sea, I  
greet you on behalf of Cheng Ai. He has laid out his dream  
of a united Grand Fleet. A fleet that can withstand any  
feeble effort from corrupt Imperials. A fleet that can  
repel foreign barbarians like the British and the  
Portuguese. With a Grand Fleet, we can and will laugh at  
any outside force. Our destiny would be our own.

It is a good dream. It is a dream many of you shared. You know Cheng Ai would take your efforts and put it all on his own back to make it real.

But one person loved the dream...but not the dreamer. One man who forgot favors and violated justice, by plunging a knife into the gut of a man he said was his friend.

This man, Li Huang, sent assassins to murder Cheng Ai. He set a cowardly ambush using foreigners as tools. At the end, he attacked on Cheng Ai's own ship, striking from behind like a skulking coward.

I expect justice for these acts. I call for it in the name of Cheng Ai. I demand it in my name--Cheng Shih, his wife!

I WILL have this dog's life. It is mine by right. But I will yield to the Grand Fleet...IF it exists. It would be for you to judge, and for you to punish, for it was your unity that he tried to steal.

What will we have? Justice, together? Or vengeance, apart?

(Silence. Then "Justice!" Then another.  
Soon the crowd begins chanting)

CROWD

Justice! Justice! Justice!

(Guards force LI HUANG to the ground.  
PAO offers a large hammer to SHIH, who  
pounds LI HUANG's hands to the deck.  
The GUARDS take over from a shaky SHIH.  
The shouts morphs into a new chant)

CROWD

Cheng Ai! Cheng Ai! Cheng Ai!

(SHIH takes this in as the crowd goes  
to a general cheer. CHENG AI enters,  
favoring his wound )

CHENG AI

Dowry...accepted.

(The crowd erupts in a new cheer as AI  
and SHIH embrace and kiss. )

CROWD

Cheng Shih! Cheng Shih! Cheng Shih!

(Lights out)

ACT II, SCENE 6 - EPILOGUE

(Two pools of light. WU steps into one)

WU

That...was costly. It will take years to replenish the power spent so foolishly. And she has claimed her power.

(SHIH steps into the second pool)

SHIH

Tai Yu, you are remarkable. At the end of trials, a new life, a new destiny, even a husband. Your plans are too subtle for a poor mortal's mind to cover

WU

It would have been so much easier if she had joined me willingly.

SHIH

How so many threads came together.

WU

Now, I must do it the hard way: take her power by force.

SHIH

Now comes the hard part--planning a wedding!

WU

Her mind will not survive. But China's future depends on this.

SHIH

I know you, great Tai Yu. There is more to come.

WU

The good of China is paramount.

SHIH

But...

SHIH AND WU

I WILL prevail.

(BLACKOUT)

END OF PLAY