



## *Chapter 4*

### ZHEN

Zhen raised his gaze to the full moon. Strolling through the empty main street, devoid of its daytime clamor, he felt almost as if he were back in the forest. Insects buzzed incessantly, and trout lapped in one of the tributaries of the Min Jiang that flowed through the town square. Crickets chirped in the rice fields, where crops that had been sown in the spring were growing straight and tall. He sniffed the air; he could detect the faintest scent of crushed leaves from the harvest of spring tea.

“This itches,” Qing grumbled, scratching the back of her neck.

She wore an oversize *rú qún*—a roughly woven cotton blouse, a plain green skirt that reached to her knees, and a pair of trousers underneath. Zhen wore a coarse hemp tunic, and unlike the extravagantly wide sleeves on robes worn by noblemen, Zhen’s sleeves narrowed around his wrists—practical for commoners

who spent their days working on farms. These were the cheapest garments and sandals they could afford with the coins they'd gotten from selling snake skin sheds to the herbalist in the small town they were in, which lay southwest of Changle.

"Just bear with the discomfort for now," Zhen replied. The top half of his long hair was twisted in a knot secured with a bamboo stick; the rest hung down past his shoulders. Qing's dark locks were tied back in two braids. "When we have more money, I'll get you new clothes that fit better, all right?"

A red banner fluttered past, liberated by a stiff gust. On it was a pair of badly drawn snakes with huge eyes and forked tongues—a discarded decoration from the spring festival a couple of months ago that had marked the beginning of the Year of the Snake. He and Qing had perched on a high tree branch outside Changle watching people light water lanterns and release them on the Min Jiang, where they floated like flickering stars in an ever-changing constellation.

"Are you sure you know the way?" Qing puffed a stray strand of hair away from her face. "I don't want to get lost. My legs are killing me."

"I know where we're going," Zhen replied a little defensively. "Traveling through towns is trickier than navigating through forests, that's all. The landmarks are different."

"And we can't read the signposts," Qing said. "You know, we really should ask someone for directions or get a map or something."

A woman's singing accompanied by music from stringed

instruments drifted through an open doorway, mingled with men's voices talking and laughing. A yellow lantern illuminated a flag painted with the character 酒; it flapped in the crisp night wind.

Qing grabbed his arm. "Hey, I've never been inside a tavern. Let's check it out."

Zhen frowned. He had tasted wine before, but Qing had not. "No. We don't have enough money for wine."

"I never said anything about drinking," Qing replied. "I just want to see what's going on. Every time I pass by a tavern, the people inside sound like they're having a great time."

"Qing, we're not supposed to draw attention to ourselves—"

"We'll stay at the back! No one will even notice us." Qing rolled her eyes. "If you're going to be such a spoilsport, you can wait here—"

"There's no way I'm letting you out of my sight." Zhen sighed. "Fine. Just for a few minutes. We'll keep close to the door. The moment there's any sign of trouble, we get out. Agreed?"

Qing smirked and dragged him through the entrance.

Inside the dimly lit establishment, the jaundiced glow from torches in sconces threw gnarled shadows across the uneven stone walls. Bones of chicken and fish littered the floor, which was tacky with spit and spilled wine. Barmaids served overflowing goblets to men who sat at haphazardly arranged tables with half-logs for benches. Some were in rowdy groups; others sat sullenly on their own.

The tables near the entrance were occupied, so Zhen and

Qing had no choice but to sidle to a vacant table in the far corner with two barrels for stools. The female singer finished her song, and as she and the musicians stepped off the cramped stage at the front, a drunk man jumped up and started spewing rude poetry. Other patrons guffawed and threw groundnut shells at him.

Zhen glanced toward the door. The sooner they could get out of there, the better. Next to him, Qing looked around with wonder instead of wariness. She didn't seem to notice men jerking their chins in their direction.

An unpleasant prickle went up Zhen's spine. He put a hand on Qing's arm. "I think we should go."

"What? We just got here!" Qing shook his hand away. "Let's see if the singer comes back after a break. I want to listen to one song before we head off."

A muscled, bullnecked man detached himself from his table of friends and walked toward them.

Zhen tensed.

"Welcome to our humble tavern, young lady." Bull Neck eyed Qing with interest as he offered a mock-gentlemanly bow. "Haven't seen you here before."

"Oh, we're just passing through," Qing replied. "By the way, do you happen to know which way out of town is better if we're headed to Mount Emei?"

"Mount Emei? That's over a thousand miles away." Bull Neck cocked his head. "Why don't you stay awhile? My friends and I would love to show you around."

“Actually, we’re leaving.” Zhen stood, pulling Qing to her feet. “Have a good evening, sir.”

“It’s rude to reject a kind offer of hospitality, young man.” Bull Neck’s eyes glinted as he blocked Zhen’s path. He turned to his friends and whistled. “Brothers, we have newcomers. Let’s give them our signature hearty welcome!”

Dread curdled in Zhen’s stomach as two of Bull Neck’s friends maneuvered toward them from opposite directions. Bull Neck leered, reaching out to touch Qing’s cheek—

Zhen’s palm flew up, stopping the man’s hand even though it was nearly as big as a bear’s paw. Qing looked startled, and surprise crossed Bull Neck’s face at Zhen’s unexpected strength.

“We don’t want any trouble.” Although Zhen’s heart was pounding, he kept his tone steely. “But I must warn you to keep your hands off my sister.”

“Ah, she’s your sister, is she?” Bull Neck let out a bark of laughter. He beckoned to his friends, who drew closer, backing Zhen and Qing into the corner. “Seems like trouble has a way of finding you two.”

The tavern around them had gone quiet. The other patrons stopped what they were doing and turned to watch. The barmaids hung back nervously.

Qing glowered at Bull Neck. “You’re such a brute. Only cowards pick on strangers. Now, get out of our way before my brother kicks your—”

Zhen grabbed Qing and pushed her behind him. Bull Neck’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

He swung at Zhen's jaw. Zhen dodged with lightning reflexes. Bull Neck lunged again, but Zhen evaded his strike with serpentine grace and Bull Neck collided with the wall behind them.

A scatter of laughter rose from onlookers.

Bull Neck growled as he heaved a large porcelain wine jar at Zhen, who dived out of the way. The wine jar hit one of Bull Neck's friends instead, bowling him over before shattering on the floor and sending wine everywhere. Some patrons scrambled out of harm's way while those at a safer distance roared with mirth and clapped.

"Zhen, look out!" Qing shouted.

Bull Neck barreled toward Zhen, a dagger in his hand. Zhen twisted away, narrowly avoiding the blade as it sliced past his ear. Bull Neck attacked again, aiming for Zhen's ribs—Zhen swiveled out of reach just in time, and the dagger slashed across one of the sacks in a pile stacked nearby.

Raw soybeans burst out of the gash and spilled and bounced across the floor. One of Bull Neck's friends slipped on the beans and fell, arms and legs flailing; he landed on his ass with a dramatic groan.

A pair of hands grabbed Zhen's head from behind. Before he could turn away, someone threw pepper in his face. Zhen flinched, his eyes burning. A solid fist connected with his stomach, knocking the wind out of him, and he doubled over as blows rained down—

Qing screamed—but it wasn't in fear.

Zhen focused his stinging eyes in time to see Qing leaping

forward with reptilian agility, her face white with rage. Her forked tongue and fanged teeth flashed before her jaws clamped onto Bull Neck's left forearm.

Bull Neck's eyes went wide. The dagger in his raised right hand, poised to descend on Zhen, fell from his grip and landed with a loud clatter.

Qing let go.

Bull Neck staggered backward. He opened his mouth, but no sound emerged—instead, blood spurted out. His friends gasped and jumped away. Bull Neck's eyes rolled back in his head as he keeled over. His arms were splayed out, revealing two stark puncture wounds on his left forearm.

Dead silence echoed before the tavern erupted in chaos.

Stools toppled over, and goblets and plates of food crashed to the floor as everyone yelled in wild panic, colliding with one another in a desperate scramble for the exit. Zhen jumped to his feet, rubbing the blinding grit out of his eyes, and pulled Qing toward the door—

The edge of a sword against his neck made him skid to a halt. Next to him, Qing did the same. Grim constables surrounded them on all sides, their swords drawn.

“Kneel!” one of the constables shouted. “Don't move, snake devils!”