

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THOUSAND AUTUMNS*

MENG XI SHI

1



Peerless

Table of Contents

[Color Gallery](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyrights and Credits](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Appendix: Character & Name Guide](#)

[Appendix: Pronunciation Guide](#)

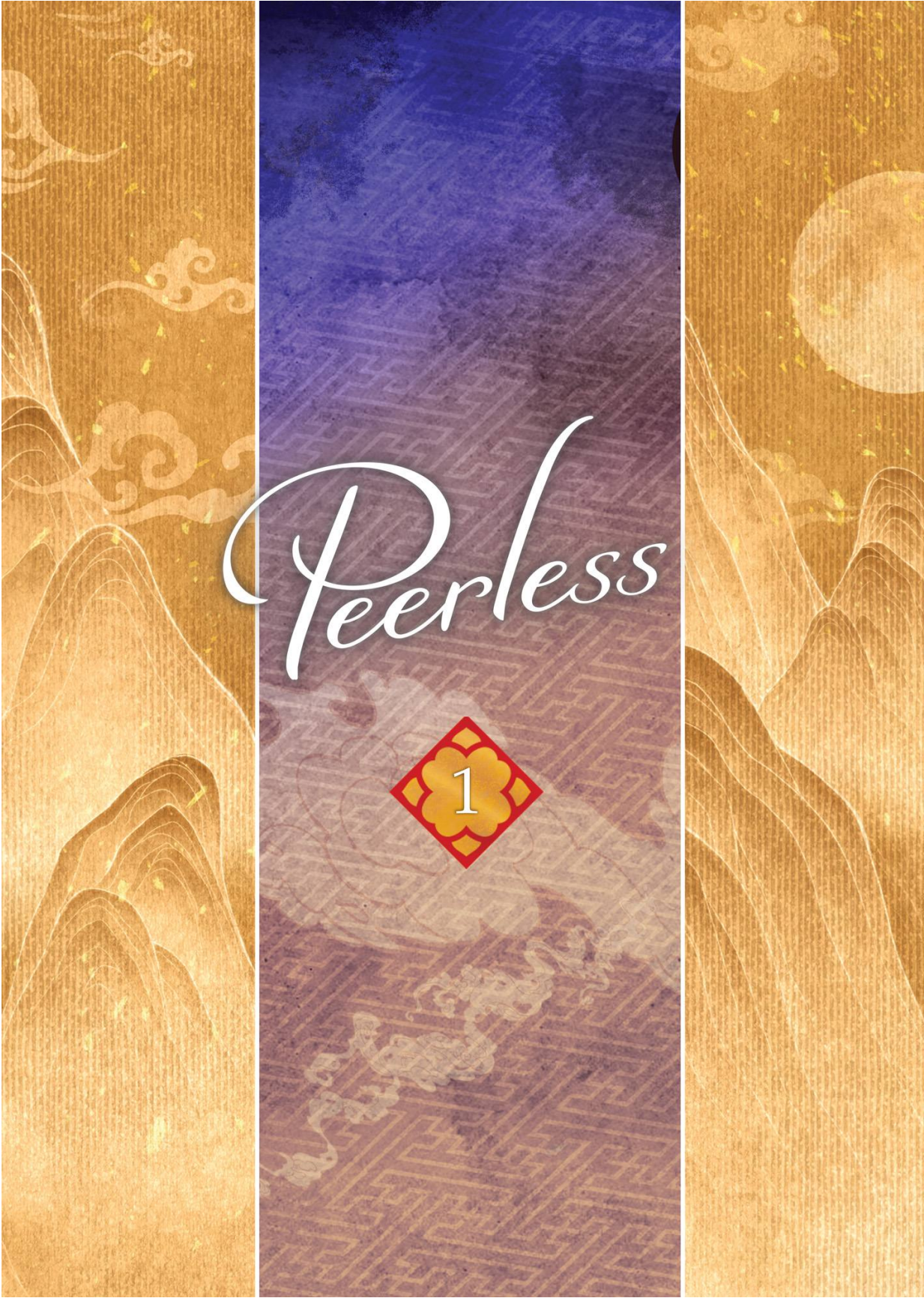
[Glossary](#)

[Footnotes](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Back Cover](#)

[Newsletter](#)



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Chapter 1

THE NORTHERN WIND scoured the land. Here, the spring winds did not reach; the third month was approaching, but the border pass remained cold and clear as ever. One moment a hint of blue remained in the sky, yet a blink later it'd changed without warning: a chill wind blew and clouds gathered, drowning the firmament in murky darkness like an unfading shadow lying heavy on a person's heart.

When Yuchi Jinwu noticed the convoy slowing, he couldn't help but lift the curtains and crane his neck to peer outside. Windblown sand swirled in through the window. Beside him, his favored concubine gasped in surprise and grabbed his arm.

"My lord, will we be able to cross the Great Wall before nightfall?" Her sweet, mellow voice lifted some of the worries from Yuchi Jinwu's heart. He absently patted his beloved concubine's thigh. He could feel it, supple beneath the thin fabric—it was easy to imagine the satiny skin he could caress if this troublesome material were removed. Right now, however, he was in no mood to flirt.

"I believe we should," Yuchi Jinwu said. He frowned, uncertain.

Yuchi Jinwu was a member of the Khotan royal family. Great Sui had recently established itself in the Central Plains, replacing Zhou to become the new, burgeoning dynasty of the northern regions. Now, the king of Khotan had ordered Yuchi Jinwu to travel to the Central Plains and offer tribute to this new emperor.

The emperor of Sui, Yang Jian, was a man who burned with ambition. He was diligent in governance, and the new dynasty rose like the dawning sun, its boundless rays blazing across the land. Even the Chen dynasty in the south had dispatched envoys to offer their congratulations.

Though Khotan was an insignificant kingdom beyond the Great Wall, the Göktürks had harassed them repeatedly, pestering them beyond endurance. When word came that the Sui dynasty planned to move their capital this year and had proclaimed a general amnesty, the Khotanese king seized his chance. He dispatched a party of - envoys led by Yuchi Jinwu and loaded them down with lavish gifts to present to the emperor of Sui in Daxing City—first, to foster good relations between the two nations, and second, to implore the Sui dynasty to send troops to defend Khotan.

Unfortunately, their journey had been plagued with troubles.

After leaving Khotan, the procession passed through Qiemo, where their horses unexpectedly fell ill with vomiting and diarrhea. When they managed to recuperate after several days' rest and embarked once more on their travels, this awful weather had beset

them. Yuchi Jinwu buzzed with anxiety—he yearned to sprout wings and fly to Daxing City in an instant.

He unconsciously cast another glance toward the corner of the carriage, where two chests were stacked. They held Yuchi Jinwu’s clothes and belongings. As the carriage was spacious and the chests fairly small, Yuchi Jinwu had specially requested they be placed in his own carriage instead of stowing them in the rear of the convoy.

His concubine noticed him looking and giggled. “My lord, have you hidden a great beauty inside those chests?”

The quip eased Yuchi Jinwu’s anxiety somewhat. “And what if I have? What would you do?”

She pouted playfully. “Then this concubine would have no choice but to step aside and surrender my lord to her!”

Yuchi Jinwu burst into laughter and pulled her into his arms, pressing their bodies tightly together. As they fawned and flirted, Yuchi Jinwu’s dark mood dissipated.

“If I tell you what’s in there, you mustn’t tell another soul. At least until we arrive in Daxing City, you have to keep quiet—not a word to anyone.”

The sterner and more urgent he grew, the more curious his concubine became. She clutched Yuchi Jinwu’s sleeve and wheedled

him sweetly as they embraced.

After a time, Yuchi Jinwu said softly, “Inside that chest is a tribute.”

His concubine was puzzled. “I thought the tributes were all in the rear carriage?”

“Only ordinary objects are stowed there,” said Yuchi Jinwu. “The emperor of Sui is the ruler of a mighty nation. Gold or jewels—such things are nothing to him.”

His concubine’s eyes widened. “Our Khotan is such a small kingdom. What wonderful treasures could we have to offer that would impress even the emperor of Sui? Could it be some kind of rare and priceless jade?”

Yuchi Jinwu pinched her lovely cheek. “How clever you are. It is indeed jade, though no ordinary kind. It’s the Jade of Heaven Lake.”

She exclaimed in surprise, “The legendary jade that grants eternal life—?!”

Yuchi Jinwu clapped a hand over her mouth. When she saw his stern glare, she realized what she’d done and hastily whispered, “This concubine has forgotten herself. This treasure is one of

Khotan's most prized possessions, yet His Majesty is happy to give it away?"

"Even if he's unhappy, what can he do?" Yuchi Jinwu said helplessly. "His Majesty wishes to forge an alliance with the Sui dynasty. He must offer something of value if he's to demonstrate his heartfelt sincerity."

Although the Jade of Heaven Lake was named thusly, it had nothing to do with the actual lake. A Khotanese woodcutter had discovered the jade after stumbling into a cave by chance. There he found a jade stone so spectacular it was like the heart of the mountain itself. Legend had it that the jade was as clear as morning dew with a pool of icy blue-green at its center, evoking an image of the real Heaven Lake surrounded by snow-clad mountains—hence the name.

The woodcutter had presented the precious gemstone to the previous king. According to rumor, the king's mother had been ailing with a strange sickness for many years. Every treatment had failed. Yet after a shard of this jade was crushed and added to her medicine, not only did the king's mother make a full recovery, her whole body seemed to have been renewed, her appearance rejuvenated. The empress dowager lived well into her nineties, and in fact had only passed away recently.

Ever since, word of the Jade of Heaven Lake had spread like wildfire. Not only could it restore one's youth—many believed it

could cure any disease, no matter how complicated or difficult, and purify the bodies of martial artists. Something so priceless was coveted by all. However, Khotan viewed the jade as a national treasure, and the king kept it well hidden. This jade was surely one of the reasons the Göktürks eyed the small nation of Khotan so hungrily.

The Khotanese king was no fool. “Holding a precious stone will cast one a sinner”—he understood this idea well. Compared with the destruction of his kingdom or the death of his family, the jade was of little import. Gifting it to the emperor of Sui in exchange for his protection would be much preferable to letting the Göktürks snatch it.

After hearing the details of the situation, the concubine was left somewhat speechless. “But my lord, is it really all right for a treasure this valuable to be escorted by so few?”

Yuchi Jinwu smiled. “Don’t underestimate the men outside. Those are the best martial artists under His Majesty’s command, and he sent almost all his strongest people with us. If they don’t stand out, that’s for the best.” He thought for a moment, then repeated: “Only you and I know of this matter. You must not speak of it to anyone else.”

The woman nodded again and again. “This concubine understands the gravity of the situation. If this news should leak, our lives are in danger. Of course the fewer people who know, the better.”

Yuchi Jinwu stroked her hair. “You’ve been at my side four or five years now,” he said with satisfaction. “I always knew you were the most sensible of them all. You needn’t worry too much. Once we cross the Wall, the emperor of Sui will send an escort to bring us to the capital. We’ll be safe and sound.”

While the two of them whispered, the wind had picked up, blowing with sand and snow. Even the sturdy carriage began to sway, creaking alarmingly as if about to collapse. No longer in the mood to converse, Yuchi Jinwu bit his lip and fell silent. His concubine clutched at his robes and huddled in his arms. She dared not move an inch.

Beneath the wind’s incessant howl, Yuchi Jinwu heard the sound of approaching hoofbeats.

To be traveling in such weather, the other party was unlikely to be merchants, who cherished their lives and wealth. Perhaps these were the emissaries the emperor of Sui had sent to receive them. The thought breathed new life into Yuchi Jinwu. He said to his concubine, “I’ll go take a look outside...”

The carriage curtain suddenly lifted as a guard stuck his head in through the window. His words came in a rush: “The winds are too strong, my lord! We should seek shelter ahead—”

Everything happened at once.

In a split second, Yuchi Jinwu's displeasure at the guard's intrusion morphed into wide-eyed terror. He watched as blood spurted and the guard's head flew. It crashed into the carriage's ceiling before thudding heavily to the floor, where it rolled on the white wool rug, staining the pristine surface with an arc of fresh crimson blood. Finally, it rolled to a stop by Yuchi Jinwu's foot.

His concubine's shriek rang in his ear, yet just then, it sounded terribly distant—as if someone had stuffed his ears with cloth, - leaving everything muffled and indiscernible. A chill wind swept over his face and a tremor wracked him. His mind roared at him to leap away, but he had lived the pampered life of a prince for too many years; his body couldn't react in time. He stared as an icy, piercing pain tore through his chest.

Yuchi Jinwu's vision was awash in the crimson of blood.

To think a person can pass from life to death in an instant.

It was his last thought before he crumpled to the floor.

The snow fell in swirling flurries, thick enough to cloak all the world's filth beneath. But this, too, was only temporary. Once the

clouds parted and the snowfall ceased, the grime would be exposed once more.

The evil of some humans was so hideous not even the heaviest of snows could mask it.

The blood dried and blackened as it mingled with the snowdrifts, like dark rocks poking out from the piles of white. Long-stiff horses lay on the ground beside their overturned carriages. Here and there, a head lay nestled in the snow. It was clear they'd died some time ago.

Hoofbeats sounded in the distance, growing nearer.

A dozen men rode in, galloping out of the snow. Icy mist and fluttering snow churned beneath the horses' hooves, rising in hazy puffs of vapor.

The man at their fore wore a black coat, and his face was swathed tightly against the cold. The only sound from him was the rustle of his sleeves as the wind billowed through them. The ten or so men behind him were bundled more securely still—even their sleeves had been cinched tight. No one was willing to expose an inch of skin to this accursed snowstorm.

It seemed the men had expected this gruesome sight. They expressed no surprise or fear, but dismounted one after another and stepped forward, bending to examine the scene.

A corpse lay in the snow. The drifts had already swallowed it from the shoulders down, leaving visible only a head and neck the pale color of ice. A long gash stretched from throat to nape, leaving the flesh beneath splayed open, deep enough to glimpse bone. A good half of the man's neck had been sliced through—his murderer had obviously used significant force.

A hand, originally concealed beneath the black coat, reached toward the corpse.

This hand was slender and fair, delicate skin wrapped around knuckles and tendons, neither bony nor bloated. It struck the perfect balance, resembling a stalk of young bamboo as it gracefully stretched forward. Even without any flashy moves, one would find their gaze drawn to it. Such a hand could only have been nurtured within the wealthiest of noble families.

But the hand's owner didn't disdain the filth. He scooped up a handful of bloodstained snow, kneaded it for a moment, then let it fall. The snow trickled through his fingers and landed on a corner of the furs he wore, where it lingered. The man dropped his chin to look where it had fallen, and his eyebrows rose a little.

The local constable at his side had been fretting over a chance to ingratiate himself with this bigwig from the capital. When he saw the direction of the man's gaze, he swiftly fished out a clean handkerchief and came forward with a smile.

“This lowly one has a handkerchief if my lord—”

He'd yet to finish when the man shed his coat completely and tossed it behind him. Under the dumbfounded stares of the constables and petty officials, the coat was caught by a young man standing behind him.

Pei Jingzhe revealed a trace of a strained smile. “Sir...”

“Take it,” the man said coolly. Without his cloak, his clothes were exposed to the wind and snow—a jade hair clasp and white robes, his sleeves dancing wildly. Just looking at him made everyone's teeth chatter. But the man's expression changed not a mote. He bent at the waist, then lowered his head to examine the corpse.

