

MENG XI SHI

Thousand
Fateams

QIAN QIU

5

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Thousand
Autumns

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5

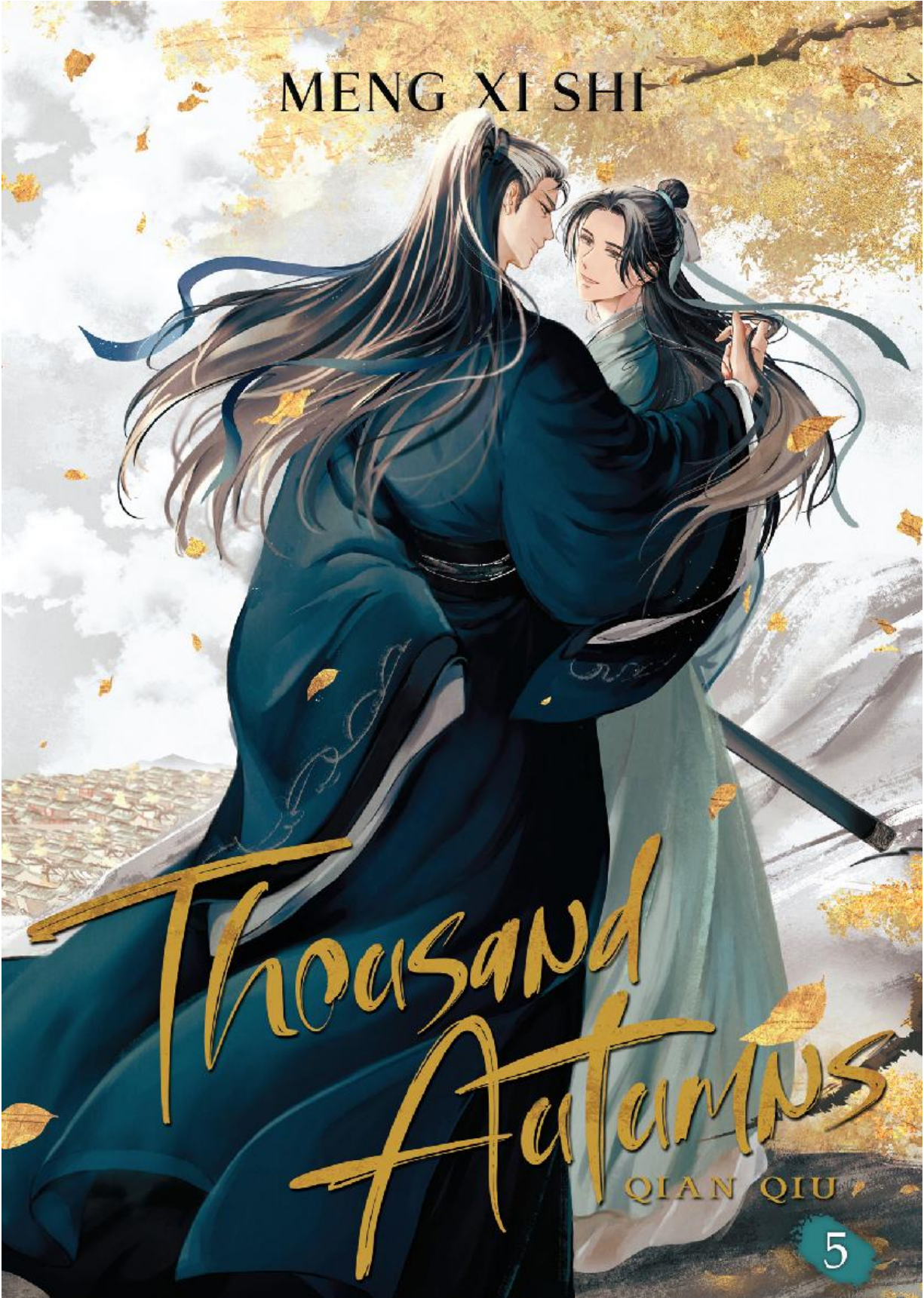


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Afterword

Chapter 111: Caught Off Guard

YAN WUSHI HAD SEEN his fill of beauties in his time. All the same, when suddenly greeted with Shen Qiao dressed in women's attire, he was left with a feeling of indescribable amazement.

That was his first reaction.

The second was: *My venerable self truly has a good eye.*

The art of disguise was demanding and nuanced. Save for changing one's face directly the way Huo Xijing did, it was utterly impossible to suddenly change appearances completely. Therefore, even after dressing up as a woman, Shen Qiao's face remained roughly the same as before. However, the maid of the Huanyue Sect was clever, and she made some modifications in the details so that the contours of his face appeared gentler and more feminine. This made it difficult for even those who knew Shen Qiao to recognize him.

Shen Qiao had always been very good-looking, but now that he'd been powdered and painted, he naturally became only more outstanding. Even in maid's clothes, his head bare of any precious

jewels or ornaments of gold and silver, others would find their attention drawn after only a glance.

Yan Wushi had also noticed this problem. “Make his face sallower.”

After a moment, Shen Qiao’s face and neck were darkened and made to appear wan, dulling his overwhelming beauty by one-third. The maid was meticulous—even the color of his hands had been changed, so that nothing would appear abnormal.

However, neither Bian Yanmei nor Shen Qiao knew any bone-shrinking techniques. Although donning women’s attire, they were still tall and thus too eye-catching. Accordingly, Puliuru Jian found two maids from the manor who were on the taller side as well. Northern women tended to be tall, so it wasn’t that difficult a task. Though they were still half a head shorter than Bian Yanmei, the height difference wasn’t too obvious after raising their soles. Onlookers only thought these four maids entering the palace were taller than average and didn’t pay any special attention to the two men in disguise.

Once the arrangements were finished, it was time to enter the palace. Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei took the gift meant for the empress from the Duke of Sui’s residence, carrying it before them with both hands as they joined the other two maids. Together, they entered the palace.

In truth, Shen Qiao wasn't too worried about his own safety. With his level of martial prowess, as long as he didn't run head-on into Xueting, he would be able to escape from danger alone even if the imperial guards surrounded him. However, if he also had to bring the two young masters and an empress with him, things would get too difficult. If something went wrong, even if Puliuru Jian didn't blame him for it, Shen Qiao's own reputation would be scattered on the winds, and he wouldn't have the face to stay in the jianghu anymore.

His thoughts twisted and turned. It didn't show in his expression, but the moment he entered the palace gates he'd already begun calculating the shortest route out of the palace.

"Stop looking." Bian Yanmei seemed to know what he was thinking. Without moving his lips, he used Sound Transmission to tell Shen Qiao secretly: "Yuwen Yun has bestowed the title of empress to five women. Though the empress we are going to rescue is the Grand Empress of the Central Palace, she is the least favored. Therefore, her palace is in the northwest. There's a long distance to walk between here and there."

Shen Qiao also silently transmitted back: "Aren't there gates in the imperial palace? What if we leave from the northern gate?"

"The northern palace gate is never open," Bian Yanmei replied. "The palace wall is high too; we might be able to leap over it ourselves, but there'll be many problems if we need to bring two or

three more people with us. The guards under Yuwen Yun are not pushovers. If we are surrounded and their archers shoot at us, there'll be no chance of escape even if we sprouted wings.”

Shen Qiao frowned a little.

Long before leaving, they had already agreed on how to escape: Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei would meet the empress, then lure the imperial guards at the gate inside and defeat them. Then they'd leave with the empress and Puliuru Jian's two sons. If they could avoid the various patrol guards and martial experts along the way, there'd be people waiting outside the gates to receive them—at that point, they'd be safe.

Once the hostages were free from Yuwen Yun's hands, Puliuru Jian could directly launch a coup. Xueting was currently at Qingliang Temple, where Yan Wushi would go to impede him. Sang Jingxing and Yuan Xiuxiu weren't in the capital, leaving Hehuan Sect leaderless for the time being. This was an opportunity bestowed by the heavens. Puliuru Jian was already in secret communication with the troops defending the capital. If his plan succeeded, the rivers and mountains would see a new ruler, and the sun and moon would shine within a new sky.

But while plans could be perfect, reality was much more troublesome—even the most meticulously laid plans would contain mistakes. Moreover, the matter itself had been a sudden one, leaving

little time for precision, and there were many variables involved. Only heaven could know whether they'd succeed.

Of course, because it was inevitable that Yuwen Yun would be alerted, if Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei were unable to rescue the hostages, Puliuru Jian would launch the coup early anyway, but that would run contrary to their original purpose of entering the palace on a rescue operation.

At this point, however, worrying about the past or future was useless and would only make them overcautious and indecisive. Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei followed the two maids, passing through the numerous halls. Step by step, they drew closer to Qingning Hall, where the Lady Puliuru lived.

The eunuch led them to Qingning Hall's entrance. His aged face was neither warm nor cold as he said, "Her Highness the Empress is right inside. Before you enter, please open the items you brought. The guards need to inspect them."

Of course, they'd already had an inspection in front of the palace gates, otherwise they'd never have been able to enter the palace. However, the emperor disliked Lady Puliuru, so everyone in the palace had followed suit in dropping rocks on the downtrodden. This was nothing new—for as long as humans walked the land, there would be people who flattered those above them while kicking the ones below.

The two maids had arrived at the palace with Lady Dugu earlier. When the demand came for the inspection, they took a step forward and placed a heavy embroidered bag into the eunuch's hands, saying, "Just a small token of our appreciation—tea money for this chamberlain. We ask him not to mind its inadequacy."

The eunuch felt the contents through the silk fabric. It wasn't silver—it was a jade pendant even more valuable than silver. His smile finally became genuine, and he didn't ask the guards to inspect further. "The empress must be anxious from all the waiting. You should go in quickly and leave as soon as you're done. Do not linger."

The maids gave their assent, thanked the eunuch, and led Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei inside.

The empress had heard the news that the emperor had given permission for her birth family to visit the palace, and she'd already brought her two younger brothers into the main hall to sit and wait.

Normally, the empress was head of the six palaces, so she shouldn't have needed to inform the emperor if she wished to grant her birth family entry. However, after the Jin Dynasty, the societal regulations had collapsed and fallen into disorder. And now that Yuwen Yun had the throne, he'd begun making his own rules, even establishing five empresses at the same time. Even if the Puliuru family held the highest position, who'd ever seen such a thing in all of history? Even Liu Cong had only elevated four empresses. Yuwen Yun's actions were truly unprecedented. Lady Puliuru was also from

a rich and powerful family—although her face didn't reveal it, it was impossible she held no grievances at all.

After the continuous house arrest she'd suffered all this time, when she saw the people her birth family had sent, the rims of her eyes instantly reddened.

The maid bowed and said, "The Lord and Lady are very concerned about the empress and the two young masters. They have specially prepared them some clothes and food and have ordered us lowly maids to enter the palace and present them."

As she spoke, she made a gesture.

The empress immediately understood and took them to a side room within the inner hall.

"Someone is watching from outside," she said. "If we talk here, they won't be able to hear. It's secure enough. Father and Mother have asked you to relay a message, haven't they?"

The maid didn't answer but only turned sideways, letting the people behind her through.

When the empress had first seen them, their heads were lowered and their clothes had been identical to the other maids', so she hadn't paid them any special attention. But now, when she looked at them again, she realized something was off.

Surely, her birth family didn't have such tall maids? They seemed a head taller than everyone else in her palace.

“You are...?”

Bian Yanmei had no interest in superfluous words. He gave a simple introduction for himself and Shen Qiao, then told the empress about their rescue plan.

“This is far too dangerous,” the empress protested, expression troubled. “You may not know, but though Buddhist Master Xueting has left the palace, his disciples are still here to recite scriptures for the emperor. There are also members of Hehuan Sect here. You'll still need to take us with you, and I fear that the two of you alone won't be enough. If anything goes wrong, all your efforts will be in vain.”

She wasn't from the jianghu, and it'd been many years since she'd married into the palace. Even if she knew about Huanyue Sect and Xuandu Mountain, there was no way for her to know just how formidable a martial artist Shen Qiao was.

Bian Yanmei didn't have the time to explain further either. “The Duke of Sui has entrusted us with this task. If we didn't have any confidence of success, we'd never have used such dangerous tactics.”

Lady Puliuru was still full of doubts. “These maids have suffered through many hardships with me. The moment we leave, they’ll inevitably bear the brunt of the emperor’s rage...”

“I heard that Your Highness is very close to Empress Zhu,” said Bian Yanmei. “Once we leave, the maids you favor can take shelter with Empress Zhu. The emperor will be focused on us; he won’t think of chasing a couple of maids.”

The empress’s two younger brothers recognized Bian Yanmei—they’d already stood up and walked over to him. Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei each picked up one of the boys. Seeing this, the empress dropped all further protests and quickly got up, following after them.

But right at that moment, a trusted maid of the empress who’d been outside the door rushed in. “Bad news, Your Highness!” she said urgently. “His Majesty has people with him, and they’re coming here!”

The emperor’s visits were so rare, they might as well have happened once every couple of thousand years. The empress was stunned frozen.

If Yuwen Yun was coming, there must be experts from Hehuan Sect or the Buddhist discipline accompanying him. If Shen Qiao and Bian Yanmei wanted to bring everyone out now, things wouldn’t be so easy.