

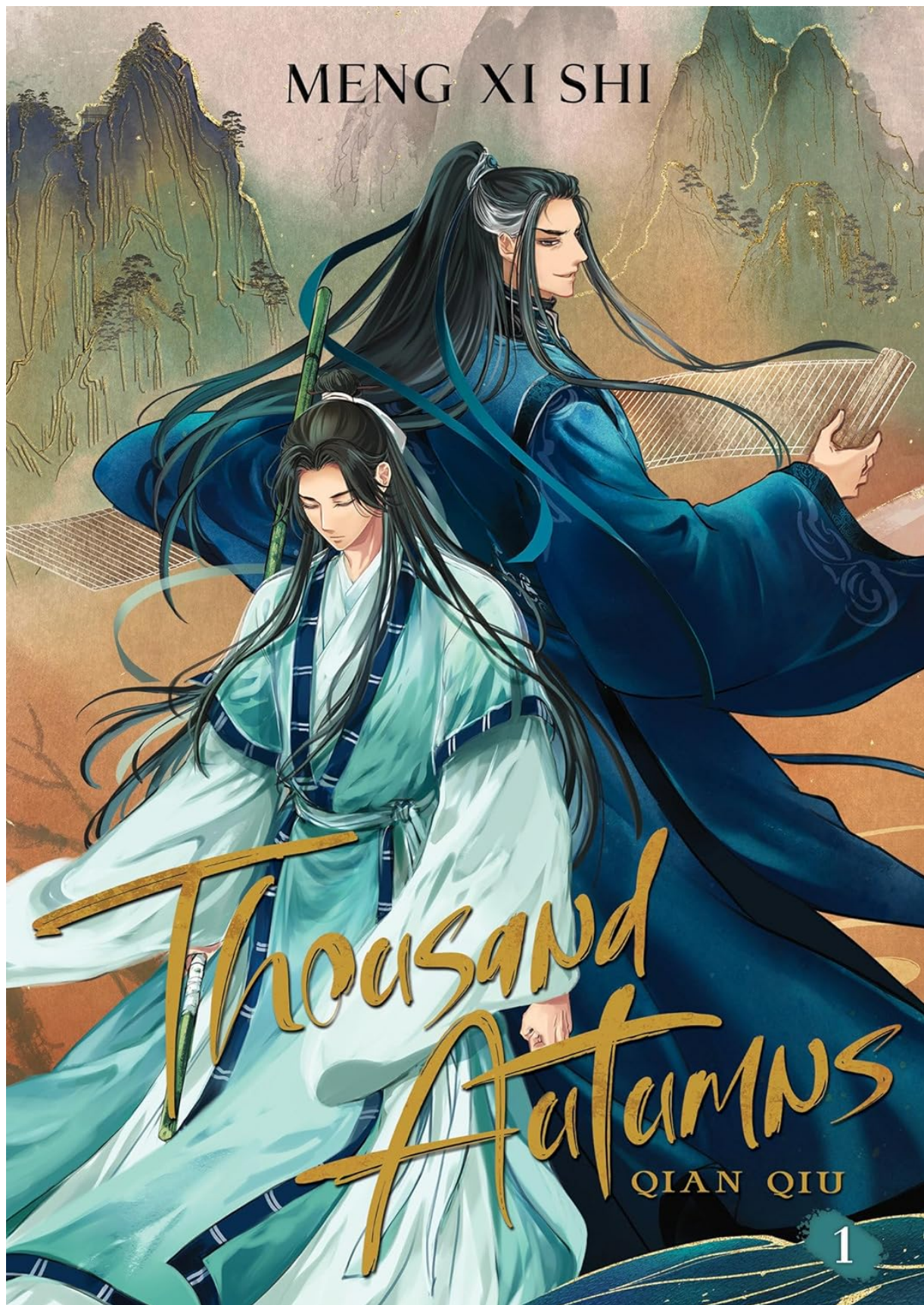
MENG XI SHI



Thousand
Fatamns

QIAN QIU

MENG XI SHI



Thousand
Autumns

QIAN QIU

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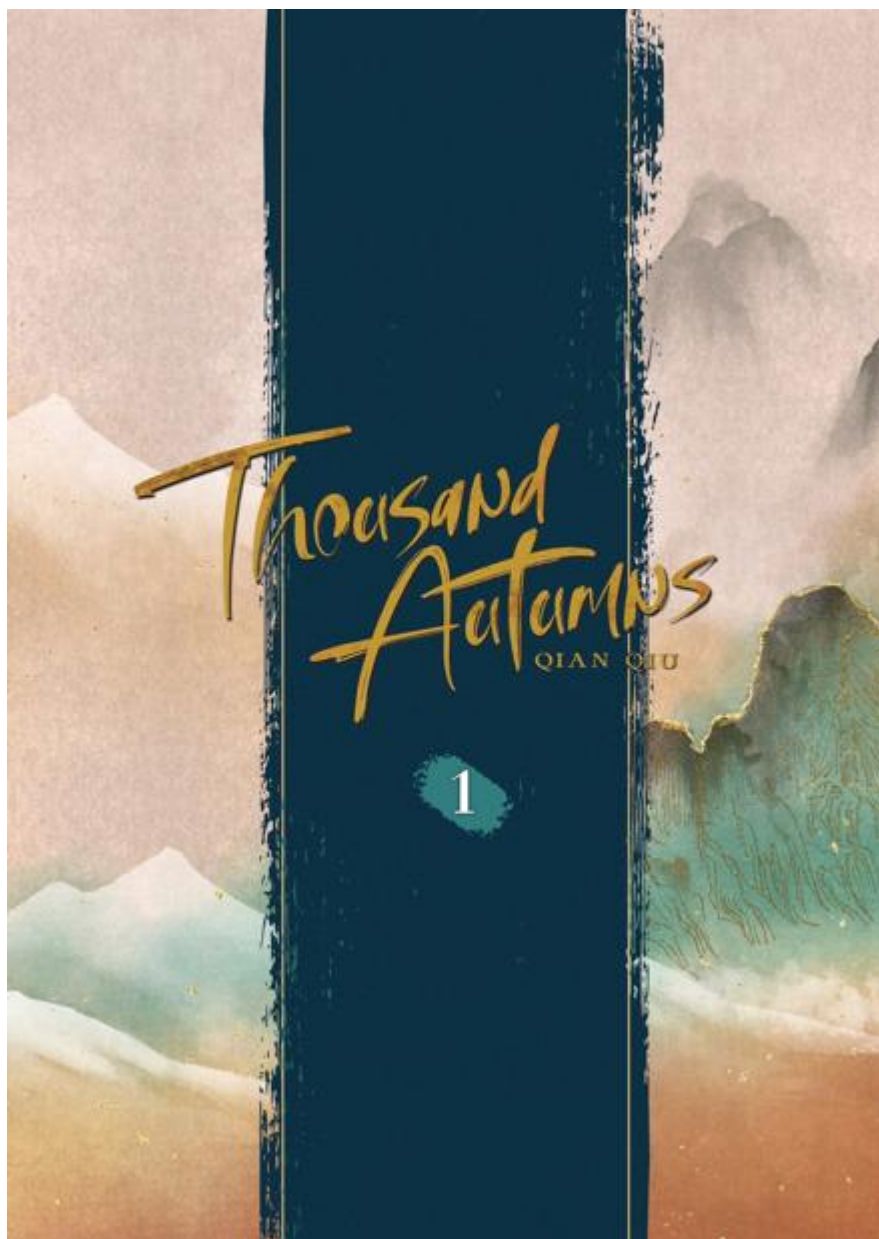
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Thousand Autumns

QIAN QIU

1

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Foreword

If you were to write a story, where would you set it?

In a splendid fantasy like *The Lord of the Rings* ? Or against the essence of human nature like *House of Cards* , where it's concealed beneath skyscrapers and high-rises?

Would you give it the qualities of all that is wonderful in the world, or fill it with candid selfishness, cruel and brutal both?

I believe that within every person's heart lies their own answer. Even if we live plain and simple lives, we can depict beautiful scenes far grander than any landscape that can be found in the world.

Thousand Autumns is the unfolding of one such story. The two leads have extreme personalities that are diametric opposites: one finds joy in helping people, while the other resolutely believes that human nature is evil. But because both are they are incredibly strong, they cannot convince each other. And so when they meet, they're destined to clash in a blaze of intense sparks.

To my dear readers, I'm grateful that we had the chance to meet. I'm grateful that you flipped open this story to enter the jianghu of ancient China, to witness the chivalry and bloodshed within, as well as the story of a man who fell from the summit down to the lowest point of his life. Who climbed out of that chasm, step by step, through his own efforts, back to the pinnacle of the world as a martial grandmaster of incredible strength.

I hope that this story will open the great gates of imagination for you, adding a splendid and passionate note of music to your lives.

Chapter 1: After the Duel

BANBU PEAK —Half-Step Peak. As the name implied, the summit boasted only a few square inches on which to stand: a half step forward led to a majestic cliff, thousands of meters tall. Above, jagged stones jutted skywards and bowed trees crept forth; below, great swathes of mist swirled and haunting wails echoed throughout. It was a treacherous, craggy place where heaven and earth did not meet.

Facing this cliff loomed another mountain summit, called Yinghui Peak. It was no less high nor steep than Banbu—its walls also soared for thousands of meters, sheer as if pared by a knife. There seemed no likely foothold, and even its scant greenery was ungrounded in soil, its roots twining about the rocks. The sight was enough to make anyone shudder and regret their attempts to scale that peak. And so, the name Yinghui Peak was born—Certain-Regret Peak.

Between these two peaks yawned a natural chasm. Seen from above, a sea of clouds drifted lazily, concealing the fathoms of its depths, and one could faintly hear the vicious roar of unceasing rapids. The common woodcutters and hunters dared not climb there; even Xiantian experts ¹ who stood there would find that a sigh stirred within their hearts, lamenting the insignificance of humans before nature.

However, below the mist at the foot of the cliff, between the river waters and mountain walls, wound a stone path paved with uneven rubble. It was long, narrow, and rugged, yet at this moment two men walked upon it, one in front and the other behind.

As the river raged and galloped, waves churned up from time to time and broke against the wet, slippery rocks. If one lacked just a little prudence while walking, they'd be soaked through by the spray even without falling

into the waters. But if they tried to lean away instead, they'd meet that sheer rock face and its sharp, jutting stones. In short, the path was a dilemma liable to leave anyone in a woeful state, and yet these two men seemed to stroll leisurely along as though through a courtyard, their movements confident and graceful.

“I heard that twenty years ago, Xuandu Mountain's Perfected Master Qi defeated the Göktürks' number one martial artist Hulugu, right here on Banbu Peak. And then he forced him to swear an oath to stay out of the Central Plains for the next twenty years. A pity this disciple was still too young to watch that duel. The battle must have been incomparably splendid.”

The young man who spoke walked behind the other. Their pace was neither slow nor quick, yet he always kept three steps behind.

The man in front sauntered in small steps, his demeanor as languid as if he truly trod on level ground. The steps of the young man behind him stretched a little longer. Taken alone, the young man in back also bore an immortal's weightless grace, but seen together it was easy to find the subtle differences between the two.

Yan Wushi gave a derisive laugh. “Qi Fengge was indeed worthy of being called number one in all the world. Hulugu was a foreign barbarian—he overestimated himself and invited humiliation because of it. He only had himself to blame. Yet, for the sake of upholding a Daoist sect's pure and lofty image, Qi Fengge refused to kill him and chose instead to establish a twenty-year covenant. Apart from sowing the seeds of trouble for Xuandu Mountain's future, what benefits did he receive?”

Yu Shengyan was curious. “Shizun, was Hulugu truly that great of a martial artist?”

“If I were to fight him now, I would have no guarantee of victory.”

“He's really that strong?” Yu Shengyan was aghast. Of course, he understood just how profound his own master's martial arts were. Hulugu's

abilities must be just as terrifying if Yan Wushi gave him such an appraisal. Perhaps he'd even rank among the top three in the world.

Yan Wushi's tone was indifferent. "Why else would I say that Qi Fengge left endless troubles for his own disciples and future generations? Twenty years ago, Hulugu might have been slightly inferior to Qi Fengge, but in twenty years, such a gap can be closed. And now, Qi Fengge is dead. Xuandu Mountain will never find a second Qi Fengge."

Yu Shengyan released a soft breath. "Yes, Perfected Master Qi passed away five years ago."

"Who is the current sect leader of Xuandu Mountain?"

"A disciple of Qi Fengge's, named Shen Qiao."

Yan Wushi had little reaction to the name. He'd met Qi Fengge only once, and that was twenty-five years ago. Back then, Shen Qiao had only just been accepted as one of Qi Fengge's personal disciples.

There was no doubt that Xuandu Mountain was called "The World's Number One Daoist Sect," but in the opinion of Yan Wushi, who had just emerged from ten years of seclusion, ² no one on Xuandu Mountain was worthy of standing as his opponent, other than Qi Fengge.

Unfortunately, Qi Fengge was dead.

Yu Shengyan saw his master's lack of interest and added, "I heard that Hulugu's disciple Kunye, the current number one martial artist of the Göktürks and Wise King of the Left, is here today at the summit of Banbu Peak to challenge Shen Qiao. He says that he wants to clear the shame from Hulugu's loss. Does Shizun wish to go and watch?"

Yan Wushi answered neither yes nor no. "In the ten or so years I spent in seclusion, what other major events occurred, apart from Qi Fengge's death?" He asked instead.

Yu Shengyan thought for a moment. “Shortly after you entered seclusion, the new emperor of Qi, Gao Wei, ascended to the throne. But he is a man of lustful indulgence and boundless extravagance, so Qi’s strength has plummeted since then. There are rumors that Yuwen Yong, the emperor of Zhou, is plotting to attack Qi—Zhou will probably annex the north soon.

“Over these last ten years, because of Qi Fengge’s death, the ranking of the world’s top ten martial artists has also changed. Yi Pichen of Chunyang Monastery on Qingcheng Mountain, Buddhist Master Xueting of Zhou, and Ruyan Kehui of Linchuan Academy are recognized as the top three in the world, and they represent exactly the three schools of Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

“But some also say the Kosa Sage of the Tuyuhun should be ranked among the top three. There’s also Hulugu—if he’s grown stronger over all these years, it’s possible he could compete for the number one position the next time he enters the Central Plains.”

After this speech, Yu Shengyan saw that his master was continuing along their path, and he couldn’t help but add, “Shizun, today’s duel between Kunye and Shen Qiao will surely be another rare and exciting battle. Shen Qiao is a recluse, and he’s fought even less since he took over leadership of Xuandu’s Violet Palace. He only ranks in the top ten on account of his master Qi Fengge’s prestigious reputation. If Shizun wishes to see the true extent of Xuandu Mountain’s strength, today’s battle is not to be missed. I imagine the summit of Yinghui Peak is already packed full with martial experts who’ve come to watch!”

“Did you think that I came here today to watch the battle?” Yan Wushi finally paused his steps.

Yu Shengyan was a bit flustered. “Then, what does Shizun mean to do?”

He’d entered discipleship beneath Yan Wushi at only seven years old. Then, three years later, Yan Wushi had lost a battle to the grandmaster of the demonic sects, Cui Youwang. Injured, Yan Wushi entered seclusion—a seclusion that lasted a decade.

During that time, Yu Shengyan continued his training according to Yan Wushi's instructions and also traveled to many places. His progress put him far beyond where he'd been before; he'd entered the ranks of first-class martial artists within the jianghu ³ long ago. But inevitably, because he hadn't seen his master in ten years, there was a sense of estrangement and unfamiliarity between them. Moreover, Yan Wushi's martial expertise had only grown more profound while he was away, and so the awe within Yu Shengyan's heart had grown deeper along with it. So much so that the usual bold and untrammelled behavior that others saw from him became restrained and tentative in his shizun's company.

Yan Wushi clasped his hands behind his back. "I've already seen the battle between Qi Fengge and Hulugu," he said, tone indifferent. "Shen Qiao and Kunye are their disciples, and they are still young. No matter how strong they are, they can't surpass the grand spectacle of that year's Qi-Hu match. I brought you here because of the fast-flowing waters and the treacherous terrain, which connects to the energies of the sky and the spirits of the earth. This makes it most suitable for training and enlightenment. While I was in seclusion, I had no time to look after you, but now that I've left, I cannot leave you to loiter and stagnate at your current level of progress. Before you comprehend the fifth stage of the *Fenglin Scriptures*, you shall stay here."

Yu Shengyan suddenly felt a bit wounded. Though he had spent these past ten years traveling here and there, he hadn't dared to neglect his training, not even for a day. Now he was only in his early twenties but had already attained the *Fenglin Scriptures*' fourth stage. In the jianghu, he was considered one of the few martial experts of the younger generation, so he'd been quite satisfied. But now it seemed his shizun saw no merit in any of this.

As if sensing his disciple's emotions, the corner of Yan Wushi's mouth tugged up in a mocking smile. "When I was your age, I had already broken through the sixth stage. What do you have to be proud of? Instead of comparing yourself to those small fry, why not compare yourself to me?"

Although the hair at Yan Wushi's temples was peppered with white, it didn't detract from his charm. In fact, that shadow of a smile made it even harder for anyone to avert their eyes from his handsome face.

His white robe, long and loose, flapped and rustled in the blustering wind, but he remained as stalwart and unmoving as ever. He simply stood there with his hands behind his back, but radiating from him was an invisible aura of all-encompassing disdain, both intimidating and crushing.

As Yu Shengyan stood opposite him, a suffocating pressure engulfed him from the front, forcing him two steps back. “Shizun is a heavenly talent, how can this disciple dare to compare himself with you?” he said, reverent and fearful.

“Greet me with the most powerful attack you can think of. I want to see how far you’ve progressed over the years.”

Yu Shengyan had not been tested in martial arts since he’d left seclusion. The order left him a little hesitant, although somewhat eager as well. But when he saw the flash of impatience on Yan Wushi’s face, his single trace of hesitation vanished.

“Then, please forgive this disciple’s rudeness!” As the words fell from his lips, his body moved as he willed it and his sleeves rose. Moving too swiftly to be seen, he was already in front of Yan Wushi.

Yu Shengyan raised an arm, his palm striking forth. To a bystander, it would appear there was no force behind this movement—it looked as gentle as if he were plucking flowers on a spring day, or whisking away dust on an autumn night—airy and light, without a wisp of firepower.

Only those in the thick of things would feel that palm’s might. In a meter-wide radius around him, the grass and trees bowed, the river waters reversed, waves swelled, and foam leapt as massive air currents erupted, and all this power surged towards Yan Wushi!

These were currents capable of suspending rivers and overturning seas, yet when they reached Yan Wushi, they seemed to be blocked by an invisible barrier. The hurtling current split into two and veered off to either side.

He still stood in the same spot as before, completely unmoved. Only when Yu Shengyan's palm was right before his eyes did he indifferently extend a single finger.

Only one finger, and no more.

And with just this finger, Yu Shengyan's attack was frozen in midair.

Yu Shengyan felt the winds from his palm strike suddenly reverse and roar towards him in a counter-current many times more powerful than his own. Alarmed, he used the current's momentum and hastily retreated.

With this one retreat, he reeled back ten steps.

Only after he'd found his footing upon a rock did he finally speak, still a bit shocked and shaky. "This disciple thanks Shizun for his mercy!"

Yu Shengyan had been quite confident when he used his palm strike—few people in all the jianghu could withstand it.

And yet, with just one finger, Yan Wushi forced him to withdraw his palm to protect himself.

Fortunately, his shizun was merely testing his progress and hadn't pressed his advantage. If it had been an enemy...

Yu Shengyan broke out in a cold sweat at the thought; he couldn't help it. He didn't dare to be so self-assured anymore.

Yan Wushi had achieved his goal. Now that he'd given Yu Shengyan a wake-up call, he didn't bother saying much more. "Don't waste your superb talents. In a few days I will travel to the Göktürk Khaganate. Once you've mastered the fifth stage here, if you have nothing to do, go and find your shixiong. ⁴ Don't wander about traveling too much."

"Yes," Yu Shengyan said reverently.