

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THOUSAND AUTUMNS*

MENG XI SHI

4

Peerless

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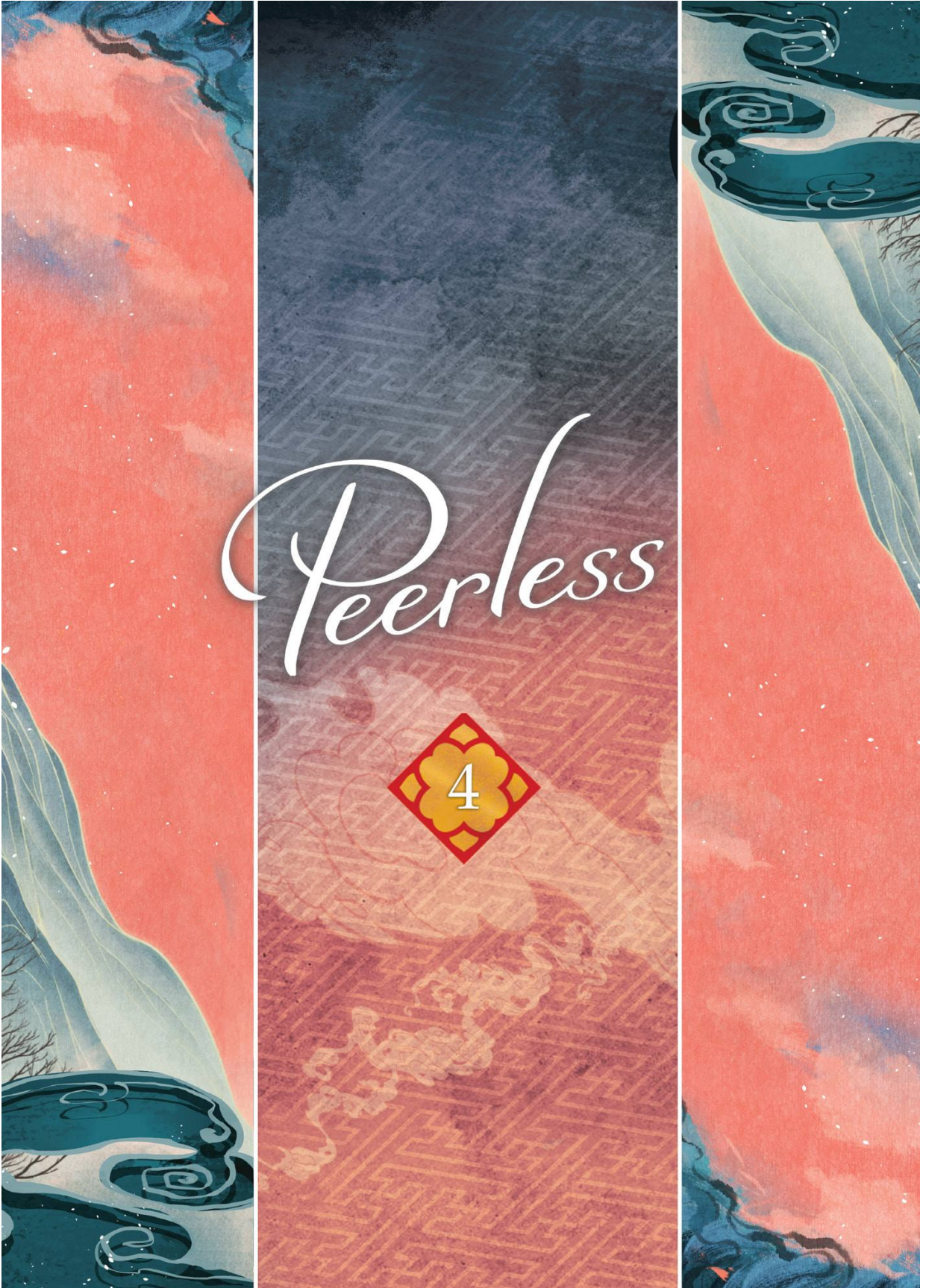
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Chapter 117

THE WINTRY WINDS howled, and the chill pierced him to the bone.

Cui Buqu wore only a flimsy inner robe as he stood on the edge of the cliff, his back to the chasm below. The Jade of Heaven Lake was in his hands, and it needed neither moon nor stars to glow. It glimmered with flashes of dark blues and pale greens, like a rippling spring.

He was baffled. Why had the Jade of Heaven Lake appeared here? He was holding the stone, but he felt neither the expected warmth nor the weight of it in his hand.

Was this a dream?

His thoughts were as chaotic as knotted thread swollen tight with seawater. Impossible to untangle, they sank only deeper with the beating of the waves. He knew he was dreaming, but he couldn't wake himself. In the depths of his confusion, he felt there was something important he still had to do.

Someone was walking toward him, their silhouette growing clearer as they drew near: Feng Xiao.

He held a longsword in one hand, cloaked in an aura of bloodlust. Cui Buqu saw that he was soaked red from head to toe, as if coming fresh from a battlefield on which he'd beheaded countless enemies. The blood on his

sword was still wet. It trickled down the blade, painting a crimson trail in his wake. He stopped in front of Cui Buqu. “Give me the jade.”

“So you really were pretending to join them?” asked Cui Buqu.

Feng Xiao nodded. “How else could we infiltrate the enemy’s lair and capture everyone in one fell swoop?”

“The pavilion leader of the Thirteen Floors. What is their real identity?”

“I haven’t managed to learn that yet,” said Feng Xiao. “But I killed Fan Yun and the others. The mastermind won’t stand for it—sooner or later he’ll reveal himself to me.”

Feng Xiao’s face was spattered with blood, his hair wild. A few strands tugged themselves loose and fell scattered over his temples, but he paid them no heed. His gaze was as keen as a knife, the slant of his mouth cold. The usual relaxed and carefree air he wore when chatting and laughing was nowhere to be seen.

“Give me the jade,” he said again, holding out his hand.

“You stabbed me and left me for dead,” said Cui Buqu coldly. “I need the jade to heal myself. Why should I give it to you?”

Even in the dream, the two rivals pulled no punches. Neither was willing to concede an inch to the other.

Cui Buqu had no friends—he didn’t need any. There would always be more cases for the Zuoyue Bureau to solve, enough to consume any spare moment he might have. Yet somehow, in recent days, Feng Xiao had become

inextricable from these cases, to the point that he was present more frequently than Qiao Xian and Zhangsun. On the surface, the two continued to match wits, never overlooking an opportunity to set one another up for a fall. But in reality...

He recalled how, in Boling Commandery, Yuan Sansi had approached him as his mother Lady Yu's shixiong. Step by step, he'd lured Cui Buqu into his trap. It wasn't that Cui Buqu hadn't had moments of suspicion. But due to the pressing nature of their circumstances, his judgment had dulled.

Feng Xiao had eavesdropped on Cui Buqu's conversation with Yuan Sansi from a tree, and had afterward proudly suggested splitting the credit for finding Emperor Xiaowu of Wei's lost treasure. Cui Buqu had taken this as confirmation that everything Yuan Sansi had said was true.

In hindsight, now that Cui Buqu considered it, his thought process had been thus: If even Feng Xiao believed Yuan Sansi, his claims must have some merit. Was this not a sign that Cui Buqu implicitly trusted Feng Xiao? Only at that moment, inside the dream, did Cui Buqu come to realize it.

Ridiculous. To think Cui Buqu, one of the world's wisest men, could make such a blunder.

The freezing winds buffeted his face, as piercingly cold as he remembered. Yet still he couldn't feel the jade stone in his hands: It was as insubstantial as a drifting cloud. He knew this was a dream—yet no matter how he struggled, he was unable to free himself from it. He remained immersed at the edge of an abyss that seemed both real yet false.

The dream Feng Xiao smiled. "You want the jade. But are you strong enough to hold onto it?"

He thrust his sword at Cui Buqu, lightning-quick. Before Cui Buqu could blink, the blade had pierced his chest. Agony engulfed him. He looked down to see fresh blood dyeing his clothes red. It was déjà vu: The same vivid pain rolled over him a second time. He doubled over, curling his body around the wound.

The bloodstained jade was snatched from his fingers. With a mocking smile, Feng Xiao thrust out a hand and shoved him off the cliff.

The fall was endless. The abyss stretched open its bloody maw to swallow him as the figure staring down at him from the cliff's edge grew smaller and smaller. The pain sharpened until the sensation consumed him. Cui Buqu opened his mouth to scream, but all he managed was a low moan.

Suddenly there was a bed, cold and hard, beneath him.

He gasped for breath, a film of cold sweat on his forehead. He cracked open his eyes, then closed them again. Even the hazy light of the night pearls embedded in the walls was blinding to someone who'd just woken up. Yet blinding as it was, it also felt real. Cui Buqu didn't raise a hand to block it out.

It was at this point that he realized someone was sitting beside his bed.

"It's me." Feng Xiao's voice was very low, as if he was wary of being heard. But in this tiny room, it was loud enough to reach Cui Buqu's ears.

Was this another dream? Cui Buqu's lips parted in a soft sigh. He'd no idea how long he'd slept. Countless images overlapped, dreams within dreams weaving together to exhaust his energy and drain his mind and body of strength.

“Your heart and lungs are undamaged. I avoided all your vital organs. Though you lost a lot of blood, Fan Yun intervened in time. Once the wound heals, you’ll be as good as new.”

Feng Xiao helped him up and held a bowl for him to drink some water. But Deputy Chief Feng rarely—or perhaps never—waited on others; he tipped the bowl a little too quickly. The remainder splashed all over Cui Buqu’s face.

Cui Buqu didn’t react. He suspected he was still dreaming, though this dream seemed more absurd and ridiculous than the rest.

“Ah, my mistake.” Feng Xiao laughed and raised his sleeve to wipe at the water dripping down Cui Buqu’s face. At the sight of Cui Buqu’s stoic expression, he couldn’t resist saying, “Don’t you have anything to ask me?”

“How...” Cui Buqu frowned at the pain in his throat, then said hoarsely, “You had only seconds to act, yet you still avoided my vitals. Did you not even damage my meridians?”

“Take a guess.” Feng Xiao watched him expectantly.

Cui Buqu didn’t have the strength to roll his eyes, so he simply shut them. *Fine, don’t tell me.* Who the hell was bored enough to play a game of riddles in a dream? When Feng Xiao stabbed him after this particular disagreement, he could fall into the next one.

But this time, he felt none of the expected pain between his ribs.

“Hey, don’t fall asleep.” Feng Xiao reached out and pried Cui Buqu’s eyelids open. Cui Buqu was forced to watch as a face thrust itself into his

field of vision. “What, is your heart acting up again? Didn’t I just give you medicine?”

“Just stab me again already,” said Cui Buqu weakly. “Make it quick.” This dream was beyond irritating.

“Fine, I’ll tell you.” Feng Xiao huffed. “You’ve finally woken up, so why are you playing dead? In Liugong City you had a high fever, and your life was hanging by a thread—that fellow Pei Jingzhe was scared out of his wits. He wanted to find you a doctor, but I stopped him. A doctor? What an astonishing waste of money. My venerable self is a practiced martial artist; I know enough medicine to get by. Back then, I took your pulse myself.”

Cui Buqu watched him in silence.

Feng Xiao leaned forward and laid his hand over Cui Buqu’s wounded chest, his touch so light Cui Buqu almost didn’t feel it. “That’s when I found your meridians were disordered and your life force was weak. The position of your heart is off by half an inch. That’s why my strike not only avoided all your vital organs but merely grazed your heart. Yes, your meridians are undamaged. If I hadn’t moved against you at that moment, or if my actions hadn’t been drastic enough, Yuxiu would have been the one to attack. Then you’d be dead for certain.”

His lips brushed Cui Buqu’s ear as he spoke. He felt the slight warmth of Feng Xiao’s breath, lending another touch of reality to the dream. He had just drawn in a breath to admit he owed Feng Xiao a favor when Feng Xiao came to a different conclusion entirely: “So you see, my attempt to save money on a doctor ended up preserving your life.”

Suddenly Cui Buqu didn’t want to say anything at all.

Feng Xiao took Cui Buqu's wrist and channeled a thread of internal energy. Cui Buqu's cold limbs gradually warmed as a blazing flame kindled to life within his chest. Even the pain retreated to the edges of his awareness.

This was feeling less and less like a dream.

In the dim light, Feng Xiao watched Cui Buqu's eyes flicker, weak and wavering, like two lanterns drifting upon a river—seemingly close, yet far out of reach. After coming to rest on him briefly, they wandered away again. Feng Xiao stretched out a hand and covered his eyes, cupping those lanterns within his palm. Immediately Cui Buqu seemed to steady himself. His eyelids tremored slightly, and his lashes brushed Feng Xiao's palm, tickling him.

“Just relax,” Feng Xiao sighed.

This man was nothing special to look at. At most, his eyes and mouth could be considered decently attractive. The wound had aggravated his perpetual look of ill health, like piling snow upon frost. His face radiated sickliness—even his lips were dry and cracked, so pale as to be bloodless. As Feng Xiao watched him, his original desire to fetch more water somehow flew out the window as another urge seized him. He slowly leaned forward until his lips brushed warmth. Only at this touch did Feng Xiao regain his senses and jerk back.

This kiss was different from his previous heartless teasing, which he'd done merely to draw a reaction from Cui Buqu. Feng Xiao realized with a start that he hadn't been thinking at all. Terrifyingly, he'd done it on pure instinct.

Feng Xiao was a rare man who considered even the famous beauty Feng Xiaolian no more enticing than a dry old bone. How could he have

fallen for an *invalid*?

Cui Buqu's eyes were covered; he had no idea what had just happened. When the hand blocking them moved away, Feng Xiao was sitting motionless beside the bed, so rigid he seemed to have been struck by a body-freezing spell. After a moment of bafflement, Cui Buqu dismissed Feng Xiao's odd behavior—it wasn't worth his energy. Instead he asked, "How did you come to be in contact with Fan Yun?"

Feng Xiao ignored him. He was submerged in his own tempestuous thoughts.

After a moment of silence, Cui Buqu tried again: "Your hair is a mess."

"Ah?" Feng Xiao shook off his distraction and produced a palm-sized bronze mirror from his sleeve. He turned his face to the night pearls and examined himself with the keen gaze of an expert martial expert as he adjusted his hair. After a moment, he breathed a sigh of relief. "It's not that bad—how is it messy?"

Cui Buqu had had enough. Here they were on the knife's edge between life and death, and Feng Xiao was still fussing over his hair. Of course—this was his true nature! At least, he thought, he could now be certain this wasn't any dream of his. "If you can't...stay long...hurry up and explain. So I can at least prepare myself." Cui Buqu was so feeble his words tumbled out, scattered and uneven.

There was nothing to be gained from keeping secrets at this point. Feng Xiao coughed lightly. "I wasn't in contact with Fan Yun. The one who approached me was Lin Yong. When we were heading back to the capital from Qiemo, he came to me with a small gift. He told me then that Ishbara Khagan has planted several spies in the capital."

Cui Buqu nodded. "I remember he carries a torch for you."

The corner of Feng Xiao's mouth twitched, but he didn't respond to this remark. "We probed each other for information. I let slip that I had recently reached a plateau in my martial arts. After a few cups of wine, I confessed that the emperor didn't trust the Jiejian Bureau, and that's why he'd established the Zuoyue Bureau: so we'd keep each other in check. Lin Yong saw his chance and revealed his identity to me. He doesn't hold a high rank in the Thirteen Floors—only seventh—and that's only because the pavilion leader thought his familiarity with the north would be useful. Otherwise he wouldn't rank above Ning Shewo."

"Has he met the pavilion leader?"

"No. It was Yuxiu who introduced him into the Thirteen Floors. Previously the pavilion leader's envoys were the ones to pass along his orders, but Lin Yong said he'd met Ning Shewo."

Injury hadn't dulled Cui Buqu's wits. "So the pavilion leader resides in the south."

"That's my belief as well," said Feng Xiao. "Lin Yong offered me three incentives for joining them: One, I would receive a noble title from the future emperor for services rendered to the throne. Two, the pavilion leader would share the Refining Jade technique. Three, I could leverage the strength of the new royal court to unify the demonic sects. He even gave me a valuable goodwill gift by order of the pavilion leader: the sarira of Cui Youwang, the former leader of the unified demonic sect."

Now even Cui Buqu was surprised. "A valuable gift indeed!"

Sarira were pearl-like relics, objects sometimes found in the ashes of enlightened monks who passed away in meditation. They embodied the great wisdom of the Buddhist master. Martial arts grandmasters of a certain level might also leave behind sarira when they were cremated. In these cases, the sarira contained all the power the grandmaster had possessed in life. Should any jianghu practitioner get their hands on one, it would have a miraculous effect on their martial arts.

But the sarira of a grandmaster was almost impossible to find—never mind the sarira of the great Cui Youwang. Naturally it would be a strong temptation for Feng Xiao, himself a demonic practitioner.

“But I don’t understand,” said Cui Buqu. “Cui Youwang’s sarira is far more valuable than the Refining Jade technique. Why didn’t the pavilion leader make it one of the incentives? Wouldn’t that be far more tempting?”

Speaking so many words in a row left him short of breath. He coughed, aggravating his blood and qi. His wound ached.

Feng Xiao wrapped his fingers around Cui Buqu’s wrist and continued channeling internal energy into him. Despite the imperious style of his martial arts, his internal energy was gentle, moderated to a perfect flow. Cui Buqu felt not the slightest twinge of discomfort. “Because he isn’t a demonic practitioner,” Feng Xiao said. “He couldn’t verify whether the sarira was genuine. Thus he chose to offer it to me as a favor, hoping to cultivate a reputation as a man who’s generous and worth following.”

“It appears the sarira is genuine.”

“It is,” said Feng Xiao with a smile. “Though there’s only one, it will be a great boon to my internal cultivation. When the pavilion leader realizes he gave it to me for nothing, his heart is sure to ache in regret. For now, he sent

a message through Lin Yong that he has two more sarira. If I commit to joining the Thirteen Floors, he'll give both to me once they achieve their goal."

Cui Buqu gave a mocking laugh. "Their 'goal' is usurping the throne. So the Refining Jade technique was enticement enough for you to set me up."

"There's a reason I didn't tell you in advance. The few words Lin Yong passed on made it clear there was someone in the Thirteen Floors who knew you very well—someone who was even familiar with your past. I suspected Qiao Xian or Zhangsun."

Cui Buqu frowned. "So you said nothing to me when I sent Zhangsun to Donghai Commandery."

"Precisely. I didn't know who the spy was, what position they held, or how much they knew. Of course I thought it best to say nothing. I was certain they'd try to recruit you, but I didn't expect you to be so steadfast and unyielding in your refusal. What happened to all that cunning? Did you truly plan on letting Yuxiu torture you to death if I sat back and did nothing?"

Cocking his head, Cui Buqu asked, "When you looked at me, weren't you hinting that I shouldn't accept?"

"I was telling you to play along." Feng Xiao saw what Cui Buqu was about. "Don't try to push the blame onto me or extract compensation. I'm telling you—this time, you brought this on yourself. These are your just deserts."

Cui Buqu blinked twice, slowly, then said with great difficulty, "You'd already joined them. If you were really a member of the Thirteen Floors and saw me cooperate so readily, wouldn't you presume something was afoot?"

Fan Yun definitely would, and if you remained silent, he'd have suspected you too. So you see, my sacrifice was all to protect *you*—”

Feng Xiao clapped his hand over Cui Buqu's mouth, rendering him unable to utter another word. “Shut up. The next time I stab you, your lordship, I won't miss.” Feng Xiao's voice was low as he hissed, “I promise I'll kill you with a single thrust!”

Cui Buqu neither resisted, nor struggled, nor made a sound. He simply looked up at him quietly. When he was peaceful like this, he appeared especially docile and meek, a sight all the more precious for its rarity. Satisfied, Feng Xiao was about to speak a few more acerbic words when they both heard a noise from outside.

Feng Xiao's head snapped around toward the door.