

## Middle Age 351

Chapter 351: The Guide to Immortality

Pharmaceutical factory, inside the office.

Qi Yun sat on the sofa chatting with Cao Yufei.

"The equipment and the remaining medicinal materials in the factory have all been dealt with. Recently, someone wanted to buy the factory, but since you mentioned it last time, I directly refused," Cao Yufei said while boiling water.

Qi Yun nodded slightly, "I'm here to talk to you about this. How's that Pang Zefeng doing?"

"Seems okay, handles things quite steadily," Cao Yufei turned around, with a slightly hesitant tone, "But if you ask me about his character, I can't vouch for it. I can only say that in this period of observation, I haven't found any problems."

"Hmm." Qi Yun responded softly, not expecting to fully understand a person in just a month or two.

After all, to test a person's character, they still need to go through some events and see how they make choices.

"Why don't you call him over, I want to have a word with him," Qi Yun said, crossing his legs.

"Okay." Cao Yufei agreed, taking out his phone to call Pang Zefeng.

In a few minutes, Pang Zefeng knocked on the door and entered the office.

After not seeing him for a while, the guy looked a lot better than before, and his eyes didn't seem so confused anymore.

"Are you getting used to it here?" Qi Yun beckoned him to sit.

"President Qi, long time no see." Pang Zefeng greeted, sitting down on the sofa, "I'm doing quite well here, President Cao takes good care of me."

Qi Yun nodded, "I called you today to discuss something with you."

Pang Zefeng didn't dare to be pretentious and quickly replied, "President Qi, just tell me what you need."

Qi Yun didn't beat around the bush, going straight to the point, "Didn't you say before that you have some research in Chinese medicine? I originally had something I wanted you to do, but considering you weren't in a good state, I wanted you to rest here with Cao for a while first."

"Now that you're back on your feet, are you interested in doing some serious work with me?"

Pang Zefeng pursed his lips, looking up at Qi Yun, "President Qi, what do you need me to do?"

Qi Yun took out a pre-prepared piece of paper from his pocket, handing it over, "Take a look at this."

Pang Zefeng took the paper, read it carefully for a while, and then hesitantly looked up, "What is this prescription?"

"Can you discern its effects?" Qi Yun asked in a somewhat probing manner, thinking that if the other party couldn't even understand this prescription, there'd be no need to talk about further development and improvement.

"Just from the herbs, it looks like it should have effects like boosting energy and blood, nourishing the spirit, and strengthening the body," Pang Zefeng replied without much thought, "But the specifics would require trials to determine."

"And the combination of ingredients in this prescription is unique and very precious. Whoever wrote this must have profound knowledge in Chinese medicine, beyond my reach."

What Pang Zefeng held was a handwritten copy of a prescription from Qi Yun from the "Inner Canon of Huangdi", although he deliberately omitted some requirements regarding the age of the herbs.

There's nothing else to do, the prescription is too valuable, and he can't trustfully hand it over entirely.

Qi Yun nodded in satisfaction, "I'm planning to base a health supplement on this prescription. What do you think of the idea?"

"Health supplement?" Pang Zefeng was a bit taken aback.

"Yes." Qi Yun pointed at Cao Yufei, continuing, "I plan to buy Old Cao's pharmaceutical factory and specialize in producing health supplements in the future."

"I'll provide the money, Old Cao will manage and sell, and you'll be in charge of the research. If it works out, I'll give you both shares."

Pang Zefeng didn't immediately understand, and Cao Yufei patted his shoulder with a smile, "This is a great opportunity for you to turn your life around. You should seize it."

The office fell into a brief silence. Pang Zefeng lowered his head without answering.

For someone who just experienced failure and had his medical license revoked, he didn't expect Qi Yun to entrust him with the research work, which made him a bit restless, unsure if he could really handle it.

Qi Yun seemed to pick up on his hesitance, chuckling softly, "You don't need to feel too much pressure. We can do a trial first, and when you make some progress, I'll invest in equipment for production."

"Didn't you say before that you've been studying Chinese medicine since you were little? I trust your ability."

Seeing Qi Yun's confidence, Pang Zefeng didn't hesitate any longer, nodding solemnly.

Like Cao Yufei said, given his current situation, without a significant opportunity, it's unlikely he'd turn his life around. The chance Qi Yun offered might be the biggest opportunity of his life.

"Give me some time. Let me first study this prescription carefully."

"Although the prescription's effects are surely remarkable, it contains too many precious herbs. If we're to produce a health supplement, some of them will definitely need to be substituted."

"No problem," Qi Yun agreed decisively, "Tell Old Cao what you need directly."

"Okay." Pang Zefeng nodded, the matter was settled.

Qi Yun stood up to say goodbye, "Alright, you two get busy. I've got to leave."

"I'll walk you out." Cao Yufei also stood up, accompanying Qi Yun to the factory entrance.

Qi Yun got into the back seat, giving one last reminder before closing the car door, "Keep an eye on things."

"Understood." Cao Yufei knew exactly what Qi Yun meant and agreed with a smile.

"Yeah, I'm off." Qi Yun waved his hand and left the pharmaceutical factory.

...

Midday, at a high-end restaurant in the New District.

Luo Yang warmly welcomed Qi Yun into a private room. From the wrinkles piled on his face, you could tell this sand dredging project was sure to be highly profitable again.

Once inside the private room, Luo Yang wasted no words, pointing to two black suitcases on the ground, "There's five million in them. Take them with you after we finish eating."

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Qi Yun was taken aback: "What do you mean?"

"Just a little token." Luo Yang invited Qi Yun to sit down and poured him a cup of tea, "The second contract section has quartz sand. You were the one who told me this news. To be honest, it's as good as handing me money."

"When I first suggested you join me in this venture, you didn't want to get involved, so I can only give you the money directly as a dividend!"

Qi Yun leaned back in his chair, waved his hand, and said, "No need, I've said it before, I just wanted to return the favor from last time."

Even though five million is not a small amount, he was being truthful; when he told Luo Yang the news back then, he really didn't expect any benefit.

Moreover, last time he brought five million in cash to the teahouse to meet with Luo Yang, intending to settle matters involving Ah Jiao and the others with money. In the end, Luo Yang waved it off casually and didn't take the money.

Now it's Qi Yun's turn, so he definitely couldn't fall short.

"Hey, that's not how this should be." Luo Yang looked seriously at Qi Yun, "I've already had experts survey the site. The quartz sand there is of high quality, conservatively estimated at twenty million tons, so giving you this five million, I'm still getting the better deal."

"Just take it, don't refuse, otherwise, I'll always feel I owe you."

Qi Yun pursed his lips, thinking that although Luo Yang was involved in dodgy dealings, he handled matters straightforwardly without twists and turns, making him a person worth associating with.

"How about this, keep the money for me, and if one day I need it, I'll come to you for it."

"Hey, you..."

"Alright, let's leave it at that." Qi Yun interrupted with a smile, "Hurry and serve the food, let's chat while we eat, I'm hungry."

Luo Yang sighed, seeing Qi Yun's firm stance, he had no choice but to agree: "Then I'll keep it here for now, call me when you need it, and I'll have someone bring it to you."

"Alright." Qi Yun nodded.

Luo Yang patted Qi Yun's arm, said no more, and called out to the waiter outside the door, "Serve the dishes."

Before long, the table was filled with dishes. It was noon, so they didn't drink too much, just opened a bottle and sipped a bit.

"Come on, cheers." Luo Yang raised his glass and clinked it with Qi Yun's before downing it in one gulp. After putting down the glass, he wiped his mouth and continued, "By the way, I recently got a new project from the city bureau, interested in joining in?"

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm recently short on time, planning a trip to Lop Nur." Qi Yun refused without a second thought.

Although he appreciated Luo Yang, he was cautious about entering business partnerships, considering Luo Yang's questionable background. It was fine to be friends, but it's better not to get involved in other matters.

Luo Yang wasn't bothered by the refusal. On the contrary, he looked with some concern at Qi Yun: "Lop Nur? I hear it's quite dangerous there, why are you going?"

Qi Yun chuckled: "Just taking a trip. I've hired a professional guide, so it should be fine."

Luo Yang nodded and refilled Qi Yun's glass.

"Hiss~"

They both had another drink, and Qi Yun took out a pack of cigarettes, offering one to Luo Yang: "You mentioned the project was from the city bureau? Do you have connections there?"

His question was straightforward, the kind of talk he would only have with someone like Luo Yang who had a similarly straightforward nature.

"Yes, I have some ties with Deputy Director Liao from the city bureau." Luo Yang accepted the cigarette, lit it, and took a puff without hiding anything.

Qi Yun pondered for a moment after hearing this.

"What's up, something wrong?" Luo Yang asked with a smile, seeing Qi Yun's thoughtful expression.

Qi Yun thought for a bit and then mentioned Zhou Hongchang's potential reassignment to Bird City.

He originally planned to bring it up casually with Shao Yuewen during their meeting that evening, maybe ask for some help.

But asking for favors from someone you've just met feels a bit too impatient.

So if Luo Yang could help out instead, it would be better than using up Shao Yuewen's goodwill.

Luo Yang puffed out smoke rings and considered for a moment, "It's not a difficult matter. I'll ask around for you; just wait for my word."

"Alright, thanks." Qi Yun thanked him with a smile, "If any leveraging is needed, just let him come."

"Oh, it's nothing major." Luo Yang waved nonchalantly, "I've got a decent relationship with him; it shouldn't be a problem."

Qi Yun nodded, "I'll remember the favor. Let me know if you need help in the future."

"No need for the formalities, let's drink." Luo Yang lifted his glass boldly.

The meal lasted about an hour, but both had matters to attend to in the afternoon, so they parted ways.

...

Somewhere in a research institute in Madrid, Spain.

An elderly man with graying hair held a magnifying glass, examining literature and documents.

The ancient papers spread across his desk were yellowed with age, clearly having been around for quite some time.

"That's right...it should be like this..."

By the bookshelf against the wall, Ignacio heard his teacher's murmur, closed his book, and moved closer.

"Teacher, have you discovered something?"

"Look here!" The teacher's hand trembled as he pointed to a passage in the ancient text, "Louis II once sent his trusted Duke Tieren overseas, seeking guidance on immortality..."

"Duke Tieren spent years traveling to the Americas, Africa, Asia, and other places on this search..."

Ignacio's eyes widened in disbelief as he lifted his head to look at his teacher, his voice trembling slightly, "You're saying... the location marked on that map is guidance on immortality!?"

The teacher nodded, then slowly shook his head, "The concept of immortality back then isn't quite the same as people understand it today."

"People of that time might have believed immortality wasn't just physical immortality, but a dual transcendence of the mind and body, reaching an extraordinary realm."

Ignacio pondered deeply, gazing at the ancient text as if seeing the silhouette of Duke Tieren tirelessly searching the world centuries ago through the yellowed pages.

"Does that mean... the place depicted on the map truly hides such a secret?" he murmured to himself.

The teacher settled back into his chair, took off his glasses, and rubbed his tired eyes, "From the current data, it's highly possible."

"The book mentions Duke Tieren's final stop in Asia, where he found some mysterious clues, and subsequent speculations suggest that place might be Lop Nur."

Ignacio felt a surge of unstoppable excitement fill him, as if he'd uncovered a monumental secret.

He turned to his teacher, eyes ablaze with excitement, "Teacher, should we tell Qi Yun about this discovery?"

The teacher frowned slightly, contemplating for a moment before replying, "Hold off for now. Although we have this lead, we need more evidence to support it. Let's continue our research. Once we have more solid findings, then tell him."

Ignacio calmed down and nodded, "Where should we start next?"

The teacher put his glasses back on, refocusing his attention on the ancient text, "We need to find the remaining travel records of Duke Tieren to see what he discovered in the Lop Nur area."

"Also, we should delve into cultural and religious records from that time—maybe they contain more clues about the guidance on immortality."

"You need to head to the University of Bologna and bring back all the books about Duke Tieren."

The University of Bologna, regarded as Europe's oldest academic institution, counts famous historical figures like Copernicus and Dante among its alumni.

Ignacio stood up straight: "Alright, teacher, I'll get ready and leave right away."

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Chapter 353: I Never Realized You Could Suck Up So Much Before  
France, Paris.

At the entrance of an apartment in the city center.

In a van, Ah Jiao, Lao Hei, and Ah Jie sat, their eyes occasionally glancing at the window on the second floor of the apartment.

"Let's act directly, I don't think they'd expect us to come after them again," suggested Lao Hei.

But Ah Jiao didn't rush into a decision. Last time, they were too hasty and fell into a trap. If Niu Da hadn't protected them from the shadows, they probably would have all been captured.

"Let's not move yet, just keep watching, and we won't show ourselves."

Upon hearing this, Lao Hei nodded silently, without further comment.

Ah Jie, in the driver's seat, turned to look at Ah Jiao and asked, "Are you saying the boss sent us reinforcements?"

"Yes." Ah Jiao checked the time on her watch. "They should be here soon. Let's keep watching for now."

Ah Jie nodded as well, and the few of them fell silent once more.

Meanwhile, in a van 300 meters away, the bearded man who tried to block Ah Jiao earlier and Bert, who had recently escaped from Hong Kong Island, were both inside.

...

At 9 PM, in a very private restaurant in Niaoshi.

Inside a private room, Qi Yun sat down and looked around. The walls were inlaid with old wood from poplar trees, and the dark brown grain was interspersed with a few pieces of glossy Gobi jade. Paintings of Western Regions murals adorned the screens, giving the whole place a sense of style.

"This place is pretty nice."

"Heh, right?" Shao Yuewen picked up the teapot, smiling as he poured tea for Qi Yun. "This 'Huyang Villa' was recommended to me by someone else—the food is quite good, and it's quiet."

"Today I've really gotten to see it for myself. I've heard others talk about this place, but never managed to find the entrance." A middle-aged man beside him jokingly pulled out a cigarette case and handed a cigarette to Qi Yun. "Here, have a smoke."

The seemingly casual joke seemed to carry an underlying meaning.

Shao Yuewen set down the teapot and introduced, "Qi Laodi, this is Xia Shaohua, Xiao Qing's uncle, Old Xia."

Upon hearing "Xiao Qing's uncle," Qi Yun immediately recognized the man's status, slightly surprised that he would come, given that he's just an uncle, not a direct relative.

Still, regardless of his thoughts, Qi Yun maintained a polite smile, stood up, and extended his hand as he accepted the cigarette: "Director Xia, a pleasure to meet you."

Xia Shaohua also stood up and shook Qi Yun's hand. "Don't call me Director Xia now, it's not work time. If you don't mind, you can call me Xia Laoge or just Old Xia."

"Yesterday, I heard from Xiao Qing's father that, thanks to you, their two kids were saved. Otherwise, we parents would have been worried sick."

"Haha, you're too kind, Xia Laoge. It was just a small favor," Qi Yun chuckled.

Shao Yuewen chimed in, "Indeed, this time we really owe it to Qi Laodi. Old Xia, you must have a good drink with him later."

As they chatted, there was a knock on the door outside the private room.

"Come in," Shao Yuewen called out, looking up.

The wooden door creaked open, and a woman in her thirties walked in. She wore a sharply tailored business suit, her black hair styled into a low bun, with a Hetian Jade Hairpin slanted through it, exuding an extraordinary aura.

This woman wasn't just conventionally beautiful; it was her unique presence that stood out.

"Minister Shao, you're here. We have a lot of guests today, sorry to keep you waiting." Her voice was magnetic, her gaze briefly settling on Qi Yun's face before moving to Xia Shaohua. "This must be Director Xia?"

Xia Shaohua did not seem surprised she recognized him immediately and simply nodded slightly.

Shao Yuewen raised his hand to introduce, "Yes, this is Old Xia. Next to him is a friend of ours, Qi Yun, President Qi."

The woman showed a hint of surprise in her eyes, then extended her hand to shake Xia Shaohua's before reaching out to Qi Yun again, smiling as she greeted, "Hello, President Qi. Be sure to visit often if you have the time."

Though she didn't quite know Qi Yun's identity yet, given Shao Yuewen's introduction, she certainly wouldn't be careless.

Shao Yuewen then pointed to the woman, speaking with familiarity, "This is Lu Zhaoxue, President Lu. This is her turf."

"President Lu, a pleasure to meet you." Qi Yun politely shook her hand, inwardly speculating about Lu Zhaoxue's background.

If she were just an ordinary restaurant owner, Shao Yuewen wouldn't be so enthusiastic given his stature.

Lu Zhaoxue withdrew her hand and placed a bottle of white liquor on the table: "This wine just arrived. Try it and see how it tastes."

Shao Yuewen smiled, "President Lu, you shouldn't have."

Lu Zhaoxue waved her hand, "Minister Shao, you're too polite. Enjoy your chat; I'll check on the kitchen." She added before turning to leave, "If you need anything, just call me anytime."

Xia Shaohua looked towards the doorway, picking up the wine bottle to inspect the label: "This wine looks quite special, where's it from?"

"They say it's private brew from the Northern Border." Shao Yuewen poured drinks for the two of them. "Give it a try. If it's good, I'll have her put a case in your cars later."

Qi Yun raised his glass, giving Shao Yuewen a sidelong glance.

That casual remark revealed something intentional about his relationship with Lu Zhaoxue—certainly not simple.

Xia Shaohua took a sip of the wine, its sweet, mulberry aroma lingering: "Tastes good, quite unique."

"Right?" said Shao Yuewen, setting down his glass. "By the way, Qi Laodi, the city is planning to organize an entrepreneurial workshop soon. There's a learning exchange in Shanghai—interested?"

Qi Yun paused: "A learning exchange?"

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"Exactly." Shao Yuewen nodded slightly, his tone carrying a hint of mystery, lowering his voice as he spoke, "This slot is quite valuable. If you're willing to go, I'll help you get signed up. It'll greatly benefit you in the future."

After hearing this, Qi Yun hesitated for a moment, understanding that Shao Yuewen's words carried an obvious tone of gratitude. This exchange opportunity was likely just a superficial gesture.

However, he currently had no significant financial desires, as he made money simply through information and current resources.

He hoped to save this favor for when he truly needed it.

"Thanks, Brother Shao. I appreciate your kindness, but I've indeed got a lot on my plate recently, and can't free myself up. You should give the spot at the exchange to someone else."

Shao Yuewen glanced at Qi Yun and, seeing his serious expression, decided not to push further: "Alright, let's wait for the next opportunity then."

"Okay, thanks!" Qi Yun raised his glass, clinking it with them before tipping his head back to finish it off.

Following that, the three of them didn't discuss any serious matters, just chatted casually.

Although Qi Yun had significant ties with both families, it wasn't possible to engage in deep discussion when they didn't fully understand each other.

Nevertheless, after a meal together, the three became somewhat familiar with each other.

As the meal came to an end, Qi Yun took the opportunity of going to the restroom to head to the reception to settle the check. Even though Shao Yuewen had organized the dinner, there was no way he'd allow the other person to pay.

After all, running all the way to Manila was aimed at building relationships with them, and he wouldn't hesitate over small expenses like this.

"Hi, I'd like to settle the bill for room 555."

"Certainly, sir, please hold on a moment." The waiter responded, then looked down at the computer to check. In less than a minute, the waiter looked up, smiled, and said, "Sir, your table doesn't need settling."

"Doesn't need settling?" Qi Yun was slightly taken aback.

"That's correct." The waiter confirmed with a smile.

"Alright, thank you." Qi Yun didn't inquire further and turned back to the room.

Inside the room, seeing Qi Yun return, Shao Yuewen, with a rosy complexion, stood up from his chair:  
"How about it? All taken care of?"

Qi Yun nodded with a smile: "Anyway, I've had enough; not sure if you two are settled."

Xia Shaohua also hiccuped from the alcohol, patted his stomach: "Alright, that's about it, got a meeting tomorrow morning."

"Alright, you two head out first. I have someone to meet later." Shao Yuewen picked up his briefcase and waved at Qi Yun.

"Sure, let's keep in touch."

Leaving the restaurant and arriving at the parking lot outside.

Two waiters respectively handed a box of wine each to Xia Shaohua's driver and Chen Wei.

Xia Shaohua glanced but didn't say anything. After all, it was just a box of wine and didn't need to be made into a big deal. Besides, his driver had been with him for many years and knows what to accept and what not to.

Chen Wei, on the other hand, looked towards Qi Yun, and only when Qi Yun nodded did he put the wine into the trunk.

Xia Shaohua pulled out a cigarette and handed it to Qi Yun. The two lit up and took a puff. Then Xia Shaohua patted Qi Yun's shoulder, speaking plainly: "Let's leave it at this today. If anything comes up, just call me."

"Okay." Qi Yun puffed a smoke ring and nodded with a smile.

"Alright, I'm off." Xia Shaohua waved as he headed towards the black Passat beside him.

Qi Yun walked contentedly to his BMW 5 Series; although the other only spoke a word, their attitude was clear.

Over an hour later, Qi Yun returned home, showered, and fell into a deep sleep.

...

Meanwhile, at W Apartments in the city.

You Wenlan, swaying a goblet in hand, lay slanted on the sofa. She asked Shao Yuewen, who was massaging her legs: "Did you tell Qi Yun about the exchange opportunity over dinner tonight?"

"I did." Shao Yuewen nodded, showing a trace of helplessness, "But that kid declined."

"Declined?" You Wenlan was a bit surprised, "Did you not explain its significance to him clearly?"

Shao Yuewen sighed: "Some things I can't say directly, I hinted indirectly. He should have understood."

"But he still refused? People are scrambling for a slot, and he's unwilling?" You Wenlan looked puzzled.

"Perhaps he has other ambitions..." Shao Yuewen also took a sip of red wine from the coffee table, continuing, "I feel like he's interesting. Not proud or impetuous, nor greedy."

"Since he doesn't want repayment now, there's no need to force it on him. Let's gradually work on the relationship, and see if opportunities arise later."

You Wenlan nodded silently without saying more.

"I've asked around; it seems he's quite close with Zhang Dayong from the New District Branch," Shao Yuewen brought up another topic.

"Zhang Dayong?" You Wenlan paused, familiar with the name; after all, she worked in natural resources in the New District, and had crossed paths with him.

"Yes."

"Isn't he affiliated with that person?" You Wenlan hesitated, "Could your interaction with Qi Yun make some people associate things?"

"No." Shao Yuewen shook his head indifferently: "We had dinner at 'Huyang Villa' tonight, no one else knows."

You Wenlan relaxed upon hearing this, reminding: "My dad mentioned results will come out soon, be careful during this time."

"Yes, I'll watch out."

...

The next day, Qi Yun was awoken by a phone ringing. He opened his eyes to see it was already past eleven in the morning.

He hadn't had such a drink in a while. Felt fine leaving the restaurant, but once home, the alcohol set in...

Grabbing the phone from the bedside table, the screen showed Mamati's name, so he braced himself and answered.

"Hey, Mamati."

Mamati noticed the raspy voice, carefully asked: "Boss Qi, hope I'm not disturbing you?"

"No, talk if you've got something." Qi Yun got up from bed, walked to the kitchen, retrieved a bottle of cold water from the fridge, and drank half of it in one go.

"Well, the team and supplies for entering Lop Nur are ready on my side. I called to coordinate the situation with you." Mamati responded quickly, "I've prepared four modified off-road vehicles, including myself, there are also two other experienced guides."

"They've also crossed Lop Nur before and know the terrain pretty well."

"Great." Qi Yun nodded, "No problem, arrange things as you see fit, I trust your judgement."

"Alright." Mamati responded, continuing, "I need to confirm our route with you. Are we crossing east to west, or taking the north-south route?"

"Neither. We're heading directly to the area near Loulan Ancient City, I'll send you the exact coordinates later." Qi Yun didn't hold back, directly stating the destination since he'd eventually need to share it.

Mamati paused to understand that Qi Yun likely was going in search of something again.

"In that case, entering from Ruqiang is closer, plus the roads there are better." Mamati offered his suggestion.

"Alright, following your lead." Qi Yun's strong suit was being receptive to advice. In areas he wasn't skilled, he'd rather trust the experts and not give blind orders.

"When shall we depart? How long do we plan to stay at the destination?"

Qi Yun stroked his chin, thought for a moment, responded: "Since everything's ready, let's head out tomorrow. We'll meet up in Ruqiang County Town tomorrow afternoon."

"As for the duration... should be no more than a week."

Mamati promptly made arrangements: "Okay, I'll contact about the registration now. We'll prepare two supply vehicles tomorrow and have them standby outside to support us anytime."

"Alright, I'll call you before we leave tomorrow."

After hanging up, Qi Yun dialed Zhong Rui's number.

"Anything happening with the company today?"

Zhong Rui shook his head: "Nothing urgent."

"Then do this: get a few more of those folding shovels from last time's desert trip, and also..." Qi Yun gave more instructions over the phone.

"Alright, understood, I'll take care of it right away."

"Yep, this time it's Lop Nur, even more dangerous than last time. Whether to go is your call, alright?" Qi Yun put down the mineral water bottle, checking Zhong Rui's thoughts.

Without hesitation, Zhong Rui shouted: "Wherever the boss goes, I'll be there! Ready to fight for the boss!"

Outside the office, Xie Mengmeng peeked her big head in, whimsically gazing at Zhong Rui, giving him a thumbs up: "Never realized you could suck up that well!"

Chapter 355: Clues to Ancient Loulan

After Qi Yun finished instructing Zhong Rui, he hung up the phone.

He browsed through the unread messages on his phone and found one from Luo Yang.

The message was simple, 'The matter is settled, have him go to the municipal bureau to find Deputy Director Liao.'

Qi Yun replied with a thank you, then found Zhou Hongchang's number and dialed it.

The call took a long time to connect.

"Hello, Brother Qi."

"Sorry, I promised to get back to you the other day, but then something urgent came up, and I left for out of town early the next morning," Qi Yun apologized slightly, "Are you still in Bird City?"

"Haha, no worries." Zhou Hongchang forced a smile, "I'm not in Bird City, I'm already back in Shanshan."

Qi Yun could hear a hint of bitterness in his laughter and knew why.

For ordinary people, it truly is too difficult to make progress.

"You were looking for me the other day, was it about your job transfer?"

"Huh?" Zhou Hongchang was taken aback, "You already know?"

"Yeah, Director Zhang told me." Qi Yun's words were straightforward, and he took the opportunity to explain for Zhang Dayong as well, "His situation is quite special right now and requires him to lay low for a while."

"I understand, I understand." Zhou Hongchang quickly replied.

Even if he felt disappointed in Zhang Dayong deep down, he would bury it and never show it outwardly.

Qi Yun paused for a moment, then continued: "But I've kept your matter in mind. Yesterday, I asked a friend to help arrange it, and there should be no problem. You should come to Bird City as soon as you can and meet with Vice Director Liao at the municipal bureau. He'll make arrangements for you."

"Huh?" Zhou Hongchang was momentarily unresponsive.

"What? You're not willing?" Qi Yun joked.

Zhou Hongchang snapped back to his senses, his tone no longer as calm as before: "No! I'm willing! I'm willing! Thank you, Brother Qi! Thank you!"

"I'll head to Bird City right now!"

"Haha, alright, if nothing else, come over early."

"Okay! Do you have time in the evening? I'd like to thank you in person." Zhou Hongchang was very excited at heart. He originally thought this matter had no hope, but unexpectedly, before he even had the chance to ask, Qi Yun had already arranged everything for him.

"The tea leaves I prepared for you a couple of days ago, I'll bring them along for you to try." Zhou Hongchang added.

Qi Yun, being experienced, naturally understood the hidden meaning of the tea leaves and smiled as he refused: "I'm not short of tea leaves; you can ask Deputy Director Liao later. If he likes tea, just give it to him."

Zhou Hongchang still insisted: "Hey! How could that be? I prepared this especially for you, Deputy Director Liao, I'll arrange separately."

"No need, really." Qi Yun sighed, "To be honest, I put in a favor for this. If I didn't consider you a friend, I certainly wouldn't have done it."

"So don't play this game with me; if I need your help in the future, I'll let you know."

Upon hearing this, Zhou Hongchang was silent for a moment, then replied firmly: "Alright, as long as it's within my capability, just say the word, and I won't hesitate to help!"

"You're being too serious, haha." Qi Yun grinned, understanding that in this day and age, people don't do good deeds without leaving a name. Even if you don't expect anything in return, at least the favor should be acknowledged, right?

Zhou Hongchang laughed along with him: "How about we find a place to eat tonight? Give me a chance to treat you to a good meal?"

"Not tonight." Qi Yun hesitated for a moment, "Tomorrow, I'm planning to go to the desert, and there are still quite a few things I haven't prepared."

"Let's do this another time; since you'll be in Bird City from now on, there'll be plenty of opportunities. Our time will come."

Seeing Qi Yun say this, Zhou Hongchang didn't insist: "Alright, call me when you get back."

"Okay, let's leave it at that for now."

After the call ended, Qi Yun put away his phone.

On the dining table, Zhao Qing had left him breakfast, and the millet porridge in the rice cooker was still warm.

Qi Yun quickly took a few bites, then swiftly freshened up and hurried out the door.

On the way to the new university, Qi Yun instructed Chen Wei: "Brother Wei, prepare for the evening. Tomorrow we're heading to Lop Nur."

"Lop Nur?" Chen Wei, who was driving, was surprised, but he didn't ask much despite his curiosity, "Alright, I understand."

"Yes, and let Pingyu know as well. The three of us, plus Zhong Rui, will go together."

"Alright."

The car quickly stopped at the entrance of the university, and Qi Yun took two boxes of tea leaves from the trunk, then stepped toward the history department.

What he had in hand was real tea leaves, not what Zhou Hongchang had mentioned.

Inside the office, Wei Xueming was deeply engrossed in studying something, and Qi Yun noticed the door was open, so he knocked lightly and walked in.

"Old Wei, long time no see, I came specifically to visit you." Qi Yun laughed as he approached the desk, placing two boxes of tea on it.

Wei Xueming looked up, adjusted his glasses: "It's been a while indeed, but are you really so kind to come and see me on purpose?"

Qi Yun was not embarrassed and replied with a grin: "You're always saying that, if I weren't so busy, I'd definitely come every week to learn from you."

Wei Xueming glanced at the tea leaves in his hand, without hesitation, reached out to take them, then waved his hand: "Alright, I got the message, if there's nothing else, you can leave, I've got some paperwork to finish."

Qi Yun rubbed his hands, took two steps back, and sat down on the sofa: "Hehe, no hurry, no hurry."

Wei Xueming chuckled: "I knew you weren't so kind-hearted, just say whatever you need."

"You really can't hide anything from you." Qi Yun licked his lips and got straight to the point, "Here's the thing, I plan to visit the vicinity of the Ancient Loulan ruins soon, and I wanted to know from you if there's any famous treasure from the history of Ancient Loulan that even foreigners might know of."

"Ancient Loulan?" Wei Xueming was taken aback, "Why would you go there for no reason?"

"No specific reason, just that I've been dreamin' about it lately, feels like something in the ether is kinda guiding me, so I'm quite curious and planning to check it out." Qi Yun fabricated a reason.

"Hmph, you're kidding me." Wei Xueming glared at him, took a sip from his tea mug, "You probably meant Loulan Ancient City, not Ancient Loulan, right?"

"What's the difference?" Qi Yun asked.

"Of course, there's a difference." Wei Xueming began to explain to him, "Ancient Loulan existed around 200 BC, it was a must-travel route on the Silk Road back then, and had a brilliant and prosperous era."

"But later, it suddenly vanished from the continent swiftly, without leaving any traces."

"There are rumors that they underwent an unprecedented sandstorm, fully buried underground; or some say it was due to a sudden plague that wiped out the entire nation... to this day, there hasn't been a definitive reason."

"Until the late 19th century, Swedish explorer Sven Hedin accidentally discovered an ancient city ruins at Lop Nur and unearthed a large number of coins, grains, pottery and other artifacts."

"Among these artifacts, some documents had the 'Loulan' inscription, which confirmed that this site was one of the city ruins of Ancient Loulan back then, now known as Loulan Ancient City."

"However, historically, Ancient Loulan was as large as the present-day Fujian Province, the found ruins known as Loulan Ancient City is just one of its many cities, do you understand this now?"

After listening, Qi Yun nodded thoughtfully: "Got it."

"So, did any famous treasure from the history of Ancient Loulan exist?"

Wei Xueming gave him a peculiar look: "Are you obsessed with treasure hunting?"

Qi Yun rubbed his nose: "Haha, don't say, but yeah, a bit."

Wei Xueming smiled helplessly: "Actually, there are very few clear records on Ancient Loulan in the existing literature, mostly verified through artifacts unearthed later."

"Historically, this kingdom, as one of the Thirty-Six Kingdoms of the Western Regions, wasn't too prominent. The reason it stands out among other small Western Regions countries is mainly because its disappearance hasn't been confirmed, not because of any widely-known treasures."

"However, I once read in a book a rather interesting theory, suggesting that the last king of Ancient Loulan, Vasumana, somehow acquired a stone tablet, believed it was a revelation from the Sun God, leading to the path of eternal life."

"Later, this news reached the Xiong Nu leader, bringing catastrophe to Ancient Loulan, with elite forces dispatched to seize the tablet, leading to its downfall."

"A stone tablet? The path to eternal life?" Qi Yun murmured, "Why does it sound so unreliable?"

Wei Xueming shook his head dismissively: "I've mentioned it's merely a theory, I personally lean more toward environmental factors causing the decline of Ancient Loulan."

Qi Yun thoughtfully rubbed his chin: "So, the so-called 'Eternal Life Stele' is merely a legend?"

"What else do you think?" Wei Xueming put down his tea mug, pointing to a book on the shelf titled "Western Regions Archaeological Records," "Sven Hedin unearthed Kharosthi Wooden Scrolls in Loulan Ancient City, which recorded matters such as farming and trade, nowhere mentioned any stone tablet."

"Though, similar Sun God Totem Stone Carvings were uncovered in Xiong Nu tombs, quite similar to the Central Plains' 'Golden Crow Carrying the Sun.'

Qi Yun remained silent for a long time, pondering deeply, still unable to fathom the significance of the coordinate point in the intelligence, if it truly aligns with a location on the shipwreck map, what exists at this location?

The Louis Family pursued for a thousand years mustn't be an ordinary treasure...

At this time, Wei Xueming spoke again, his eyes fixed on Qi Yun: "Be honest with me, do you have some clue, wanting to find a certain thing?"

Qi Yun smiled bitterly: "Old Wei, why don't you believe me, I'm really not specifically looking for anything, just exploring."

Wei Xueming smirked: "I might believe others, but you... can even dig out the Qingnang Book, what else is impossible for you..."

Chapter 356: The Giant of France

New District, Hilton Hotel Presidential Suite.

Zhao Weilin leaned half against the lounge chair, staring blankly at the distant snowy mountains.

Dong Anyun walked in with a stack of documents in her hand, knocking on the door.

"Chairman, these are some project application materials that need your approval." She said as she handed the documents to Zhao Weilin.

Zhao Weilin took the documents and summoned his energy to seriously review them.

After about ten minutes, he finished processing the documents and handed them back to Dong Anyun: "Arrange for me to meet Qi Yun; I want to see him."

Dong Anyun nodded and took out her phone to call Qi Yun. It took a full half-minute before the call was answered.

"Mr. Qi, do you have time now? Our Chairman wants to meet with you."

"Not today, I'm busy with something recently, maybe in a few days." On the other end, Qi Yun didn't have anything urgent, he was actually training with Chen Wei.

However, he was quite dissatisfied with Zhao Weilin's high-handed and authoritative attitude and wanted to let him cool down a bit to make him aware of his position and attitude.

"Alright, I'll contact you in a few days then." Dong Anyun hung up the phone with a helpless shake of her head at Zhao Weilin, "He refuses to meet."

Zhao Weilin snorted coldly, looking displeased.

Dong Anyun bit her lip, hesitating for a while: "I messaged Miss Zhao yesterday. From her reply, it seems she still doesn't know about this; Qi Yun probably hasn't told her yet."

"Should I go see Miss Zhao and tell her the truth?"

Zhao Weilin was silent for a moment, and finally sighed deeply: "Back then, for a lucrative opportunity, I ignored her mother's objections and went to America alone, abandoning them."

"When I returned after achieving success, her mother had already passed away, and I had completely lost contact with her."

"She was only five years old then. I don't know whether she will forgive me..."

Hearing this, Dong Anyun was taken aback, hearing Zhao Weilin mention this for the first time.

"You have to try to know the outcome, right? Honestly, since you learned about Miss Zhao, you've changed a bit, unlike yourself."

Zhao Weilin's expression froze for several seconds before he replied: "Prepare a gift for me. It's just right for tomorrow's weekend, I'll go see her."

"Okay." Dong Anyun responded succinctly and didn't ask what kind of gift to prepare, directly walking out the door.

This is the difference between a professional secretary and a decorative secretary. The former can solve many problems for the boss without them worrying too much, while the latter can only help with personal issues.

...

Paris, across the street from the apartment, Ah Jiao, Lao Hei, and Ah Jie sat in the van, their eyes glued to the window. They had been staking out all day.

"Ah Jiao, how long do we have to wait before taking action?" Ah Jie asked wearily, wiping his face with bloodshot eyes.

Ah Jiao glanced at the window on the second floor of the apartment, her tone heavy: "Something doesn't feel right; he's too calm."

"He should know that we haven't been caught, so as the person who leaked false information to us, he should be at least a bit cautious, right? But he's not, and even brought a woman home last night."

"Let's wait a bit longer, wait until he comes back."

As soon as she finished speaking, the notification sound "ding ding!" came from the phone in her pocket.

Ah Jiao took out her phone and glanced at it, then instructed the driver, Lao Hei: "Go pick him up from the next street."

Upon hearing this, Lao Hei swiftly turned the key, started the van, and quietly drove away.

A few minutes later, a slightly frail figure opened the van door and climbed inside.

The person wore a hoodie and was unassuming; it was the long-lost Lao Gui.

After being rescued by Qi Yun last time, he contemplated for a long time and finally decided to work with Qi Yun, ending his tumultuous life.

Lao Gui wasn't known for his skills, but tracking people, scouting, and borrowing things were his fortes.

"Someone is watching nearby."

Ah Jie was skeptical after hearing this: "No way, we've been staking out here all day and didn't notice anyone else."

"At the corner of the street, about three or four hundred meters away, there's a black business car." Lao Gui said with certainty.

Ah Jiao furrowed her brows and pondered for a while: "The opposition is prepared; we can't go inside, or we'll easily get trapped."

"Act when he goes out today!"

Lao Hei also furrowed his brow: "What about those people?"

"Let Brother Niu block them." Ah Jiao spoke briefly, "Once we grab the person, go straight to the prearranged location."

"Okay."

The group quickly decided and quietly returned to the other side of the street.

Two hours later, the informant who had been caught by Ah Jiao's team last time exited the apartment, took out his car keys from his pocket, and was about to open the car door.

Suddenly, a white van sped by, and as it passed beside the informant, the door was flung open. Lao Hei jumped out, punched the informant twice, and finally struck his temple with a swift elbow, knocking him out.

It all happened so quickly. From the van's sudden appearance to its disappearance, it took only a few seconds.

At the apartment entrance, two agents hiding in the shadows quickly ran towards the scene, but the van had already made its getaway. How could two legs outrun four wheels?

Not far behind, a black business car also sped forward, chasing after the van.

However, just as they reached the street corner, a box truck suddenly appeared, blocking the road and cutting off their pursuit.

#### Chapter 357: The Giant of France

Inside the business car, the driver frantically honked the horn, but the truck showed no intention of moving aside.

The bearded man in the passenger seat's face turned pale, realizing the truck was deliberately blocking them, and shouted, "Get out!"

The car door opened, and the bearded man led several sturdy men, quickly rushing towards the truck.

In the driver's seat of the truck, Niu Da glanced at his watch to check the time, then opened the door and got out.

Instead of retreating, he advanced fearlessly towards the aggressive bearded man and his companions.

Niu Da stood close to 1.9 meters tall, his frame was extremely robust, but compared to these big guys, he was a size smaller.

However, fighting and combat is not won by physical strength alone.

Niu Da's feet moved quickly, dodging a punch aimed at his face, then twisted his shoulder and slammed into a man's chest with an iron shoulder tackle.

The big man seemed to be hit by a train, flying backward several meters and crashing hard onto the ground.

Simultaneously, Niu Da threw two punches, hitting the throats of the two men in front.

The two immediately clutched their necks in pain, involuntarily retreating a few steps.

The bearded man's gaze turned sharp, staring at Niu Da, "It was also you last time, wasn't it?"

Niu Da stayed silent, having knocked down three people, charging straight at the bearded man.

The bearded man, with a dark expression, pulled a silver pistol from his waist, raising his hand to fire.

However, Niu Da didn't give him a chance, swiftly sidestepping and delivering a high kick to the bearded man's head, knocking him out cold with a single blow.

Within seconds, the four muscular men were all knocked down, showing the gap between ordinary thugs and mercenaries.

Though these folks might be tough and willing to fight, their skills were crude and no match.

Niu Da bent down, lifting the bearded man's clothes and waistband, ready to toss him into the car.

This was Ah Jiao's idea, catching the leader would hopefully lead to useful information.

The hefty three-hundred-pound weight wasn't too heavy for Niu Da, his arm muscles bulging, easily lifting the man.

Just as he was about to turn and leave, his ears twitched, and in the next moment, he threw down the bearded man and quickly sidestepped without looking back.

A gust of wind swept through the air, a fist the size of a sandbag almost brushed past his cheek.

Niu Da froze, a hint of surprise on his face.

He had recognized the assailant as one of the two white men he previously fought on Hong Kong Island, the one who jumped into the sea, Bert.

After missing the attack, Bert didn't rush to strike again, looking at Niu Da with a hint of excitement.

"Finally, I've met you again. I didn't get to fight you properly last time, but now I finally have the chance," Bert said in English, gazing at Niu Da like a predator at prey.

Niu Da saw that the opponent wanted a head-to-head fight, so he pointed to the rooftop of the apartment building expressionlessly, "Fight there!"

Upon hearing this, Bert nodded and turned towards the apartment.

Having fought with Niu Da before, Bert knew Niu Da was skilled, so he regarded him as an equally matched opponent.

However, the instant Bert turned around, Niu Da didn't follow but rushed to the driver's seat instead, entered the cab with two quick strides, shifted gears, and floored the accelerator—all in one fluid motion.

The van spewed exhaust as it sped away from the intersection, leaving Bert standing bewildered in the wind.

Niu Da glanced at him through the rearview mirror, sneering disdainfully, "Crazy idiot."

"Fuck!" After pausing for a full two seconds, Bert finally reacted, kicking the bearded man aside and jumped into the business car, commanding the driver to quickly give chase.

...

Bird City, ten at night.

After dinner, Qi Yun was training in the yard with Chen Wei.

Summer had fully kicked in; even at ten, it was still bright outside.

"You're progressing too fast, especially in fitness. I feel I might be out of a job within a couple of years," Chen Wei said, taking a sip from a water bottle.

Qi Yun wiped sweat from his face with a towel, then looked at his newly formed abs and chest muscles, laughing lightly, "Is it that exaggerated?"

He hadn't intentionally built muscles; just trained with Chen Wei every day for stamina and striking. The muscles appeared naturally.

Chen Wei nodded, "You only lack practical experience and skill refinement now. I estimate even Mengzi isn't your match anymore."

"Then after we return, I'll definitely spar with him," Qi Yun grinned proudly.

"Ding ding ding~"

A phone rang.

Qi Yun picked up the phone from the small table and, checking the number, pressed the answer key.

"Hello."

"It's been confirmed, the guy setting us up is that Charles de Gaulle Gwen. Just now, Brother Niu also encountered that white guy from Hong Kong Island," Ah Jiao's voice came over the phone.

Qi Yun was slightly stunned, "Are you guys okay?"

"We're fine, safe for now," Ah Jiao responded calmly. "We got some intel from a broker—De Gaulle is the head of the Gwen Clan in Paris, their base is in Lyon."

"This clan is influential and very discreet. Reportedly, over 10% of the energy business in France is controlled by them."

"They're not involved in the underworld directly, but those who know their background wouldn't dare offend them."

Qi Yun pinched his brow, though he anticipated complexities, he hadn't realized the extent of their power.

"Try to approach De Gaulle's inner circle; I need to know why they're probing about me. We can't use force anymore, need a different tactic."

Pausing, Qi Yun continued, "If things become unfavorable or you sense danger, retreat immediately, no risks."

"Understood," Ah Jiao replied.

"Yeah, I need to head out tomorrow, might be out of touch for a few days. I'll provide Li Yaohua's number; if there's an emergency, contact him directly—he'll manage things properly," Qi Yun instructed.

"Alright, we'll be careful,"

"Okay, that's all for now."

After ending the call, Qi Yun was about to put down the phone when another call came in—it was Wei Xueming, whom he met earlier that morning.

"Mr. Wei, do you need something?" Qi Yun inquired politely.

"When do you plan to leave for Lop Nur?" Wei Xueming asked directly.

"Leaving tomorrow morning, why?"

Wei Xueming hesitated, "I have a favor to ask."

"Haha, feel free to ask, sir," Qi Yun replied with a smile.

"Well, I have a student working on a Thirty-Six Kingdoms of the Western Regions project; could you take him along?"

"Huh?" Qi Yun was surprised, not expecting this request from Wei Xueming.

He paused, a bit hesitant, "Mr. Wei, you must have a dedicated research team. Why follow me to Lop Nur? If something happens, I can't bear the responsibility."

Wei Xueming persisted, "I value this student; he has considerable knowledge about the Thirty-Six Kingdoms, he'll surely help."

"Furthermore, he wants to join you voluntarily. If anything does happen, no blame on you—I'll ensure a written agreement for that."

Pausing, Wei Xueming continued, "Most importantly, knowing you, you're up to something there and he might discover something with you."

"Were it not for my old bones, I'd like to join myself."

Qi Yun scratched his nose, resignedly smiling, "Mr. Wei, please don't jest. I'm honestly just wandering around, sightseeing."

Wei Xueming seemed to see through him, scoffing lightly, "Cut the talk, just tell me if you'll agree, don't forget you owe me after that Chinese Academy of Sciences matter."

...

The next day, before dawn, a business car passed through the highway toll booth, heading south.

It's about nine hundred kilometers from Bird City to Ruqiang County; luckily, a new highway recently opened, eliminating the need for mountainous detours, saving two hundred extra kilometers.

Nonetheless, it still takes over ten hours to reach.

#### Chapter 358: The Legend of Loulan

On the highway, Zhong Rui was driving, Chen Wei and Duan Pingyu were sitting in the back row, silent, while Qi Yun was chatting with a man in his thirties next to him.

The man's name was Zhan Hongbo, he was Wei Xueming's doctoral student. He wore black glasses, had a scholarly appearance, and spoke very politely.

As Wei Xueming had said, Zhan Hongbo indeed had a deep understanding of the culture of the Thirty-Six Kingdoms of the Western Regions and told Qi Yun a lot about the history of the Ancient Loulan along the way.

At six in the afternoon, after ten hours of long-distance travel, the group finally arrived at Ruqiang County Town.

As the largest county in China, its area was as large as two Zhejiang Provinces, but the population was only a few tens of thousand, so much so that the empty streets were devoid of people.

Qi Yun's group met with Mamati at a repair shop in the town, where he was making final preparations for several vehicles.

"Boss Qi." Seeing Qi Yun get out of the business vehicle, Mamati came up to greet him.

Qi Yun nodded to him: "How are things going on your end?"

"All arranged, ready to go anytime," Mamati replied concisely.

"Okay, then let's rest for a night in the county and set off early tomorrow morning." Qi Yun glanced into the repair shop, "Where are the two guides you found?"

"Lao Tu! Da Ming!" Mamati turned to shout into the shop.

Soon, two middle-aged men came out.

"This is Boss Qi, my old employer," Mamati introduced them, then turned to Qi Yun, "Boss Qi, this is Lao Tu and Da Ming, both very experienced guides."

"Hello, Boss Qi!" the two greeted Qi Yun with a smile.

Qi Yun nodded lightly, his gaze sweeping over their faces.

Whether intentionally or not, this time Mamati didn't find his fellow countrymen, but two Han Chinese.

Lao Tu appeared older, probably in his forties; years of exposure to the elements had turned his skin a deep brown.

The other, Da Ming, seemed about the same age as Mamati, with a sturdy build, his muscular chest visible beneath his short sleeves.

Judging by their appearances alone, they both seemed honest, but appearances can be deceiving, as Qi Yun vividly remembered from his last experience.

"Let's find a place to have a meal together," Qi Yun said with a smile.

...

The night passed without incident.

The next morning, after breakfast at the hotel, the group left the county, heading east.

This time there were a total of five vehicles, all modified Wranglers, four of which would go deep into the desert, while the other waited on the edge, ready to provide support.

Due to the increasing number of tourists in Jiang Province in recent years, many historical sites have been developed into tourist attractions.

This includes the ruins of Loulan Ancient City.

From Ruqiang County Town to the ruins of Loulan Ancient City is more than 200 kilometers, and this route is not a desert route but a provincial road, leading straight to the scenic area.

But Qi Yun's destination this time was not near the scenic area; instead, they would go nearly another 200 kilometers into the heart of the desert.

Three hours later, the convoy reached a T-intersection, with the famous scenic spot of the Loulan Ancient City ruins to the right.

Driving the lead car, Mamati slowly stopped by the roadside. He picked up the professional navigation equipment and turned to look at Qi Yun sitting in the back: "Boss Qi, we'll be entering the desert section in two kilometers ahead."

"Plan to reach the first camp 80 kilometers away by 9 PM."

Qi Yun nodded, then opened the door to get out, stretching lazily.

Today's temperature wasn't very high, but it was still 32 degrees. This temperature might not feel very hot elsewhere, but in the desert, it was another story.

The hot waves, carried by a light breeze, made one feel parched.

In the sunlight, even the distorted heat waves were visible.

Qi Yun took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and walked over to the Wrangler behind, asking Zhong Rui, who was driving: "How about it? Want Brother Wei to replace you?"

Zhong Rui grimaced and shook his head: "No need, I want to experience driving in the desert for a while."

Qi Yun chuckled and didn't say more.

This time, there were a total of four vehicles going into the desert, but Mamati's team had only three guides. Originally, there was another driver specifically for driving, but after discussing with Qi Yun, they decided to let him stay in Ruqiang County.

Because going deep into the desert was full of uncertainties, and every extra person meant consuming additional supplies. Anyway, Chen Wei also had rich driving experience, so they let him drive.

After a short break, the convoy set off again. After driving for another ten or so minutes, Mamati, driving the lead vehicle, left the provincial road and turned into the boundless sand dunes.

Zhan Hongbo lowered the car window and pointed to the distant, faintly visible dunes: "Brother Qi, over there is the outskirts of the Loulan Ancient City ruins. Those Yardang landforms you see might have been the fortress walls in ancient times."

He had been to this site for research before, so he was very familiar with it.

Following Zhan Hongbo's pointed direction, Qi Yun looked over and saw the distant Yardang landforms under the sunlight, displaying a peculiar earthy yellow, the wind-eroded mounds undulating like natural barriers.

"It's truly nature's artistry," he couldn't help but sigh.

"Indeed," Zhan Hongbo adjusted his glasses, his tone carrying a hint of professional rigor, "the formation of these Yardang landforms took at least ten thousand years of wind erosion. According to research, in ancient times, Loulan Ancient City relied on these terrains to build their defense systems."

#### Chapter 359: The Legend of Loulan (Part 2)

Sitting in the passenger seat, Duan Pingyu suddenly spoke: "Hongbo, brother, you say the Ancient Loulan was so prosperous back in the day, why did it suddenly disappear?"

Zhan Hongbo heard this and gently shook his head: "There are various academic theories regarding the disappearance of Loulan, some say it was due to the diversion of the Talimu River, leading to a depletion of water sources."

"There are also theories about the impact of war or plague, but personally I lean more towards the theory of environmental deterioration."

Qi Yun was actually also quite curious about this part of history. Such a large country vanished rapidly in a short period, truly sparking endless imagination.

As for the coordinate location that appeared in that purple intelligence report, it generated even more speculation for him, yet currently the information is too scarce to uncover the truth.

At this moment, Mamati, focused on driving, suddenly spoke: "The slope of the dune ahead is quite steep, everyone hold tight."

Saying this, he picked up the walkie-talkie and gave a reminder to the other cars.

The vehicle bumped along the rolling dunes, with the boundless desert stretching to the horizon. Occasionally, some hardy camelthorn plants could be seen growing in the gravel.

Zhan Hongbo was rather talkative; while looking out the window, he spoke again: "Brother Qi, did you know? In the Loulan Ancient City, there was once unearthed a Kharosthi Wooden Scroll, recording the local people's application to the government for water use, which indirectly reflects the tension of water resources at the time."

"Kharosthi?" Qi Yun was a bit unfamiliar with the term.

"Yes." Zhan Hongbo explained, "That was an ancient script from the Central Asia region, many Kharosthi documents have been unearthed in the Loulan ruins, providing important materials for studying Loulan's history."

Qi Yun nodded slowly, suddenly recalling the scene of conversing in Wei Xueming's office.

"Hongbo, have you heard of a viewpoint claiming that Loulan's last king, by chance, obtained a stele and believed that stele was an oracle from the Sun God, leading to the path of eternal life."

"Later, the Xiong Nu learned about this news, sent troops to seize the stele, and annihilated the Loulan people."

"I've heard of this claim. It seems a historian from abroad proposed it many years ago." Zhan Hongbo chuckled and shook his head, "But personally I find this view too fantastical, like how the Jingjue Kingdom is said to be a Demon Country."

Qi Yun turned thoughtfully to look out the window, understanding from Zhan Hongbo's words that this person still leaned towards viewpoints closer to scientific reasoning.

At nine o'clock in the evening, the sky was still bright, the sun had not yet set, and a white crescent moon appeared in the sky.

After a whole day of travel, the convoy finally arrived at the first scheduled camp.

Four vehicles formed a circle next to a dune, facilitating tent setup while also providing good protection against wind and sand.

Even though it was already nighttime, the temperature in the desert still hadn't dropped, remaining as hot as a furnace.

To truly cool down, it would likely take another two to three hours.

The group set up tents around the vehicles, while Mamati retrieved a pre-marinated leg of lamb from the cooler in the car, beginning to prepare dinner.

His method was quite primitive, wrapping the marinated leg of lamb with aluminum foil, then digging a small pit to place the lamb inside, covering the surface with scalding sand.

This could be considered an alternative way of making Nang pit meat.

Duan Pingyu looked over with some curiosity: "Is lamb cooked like this tasty?"

"Many herdsmen cook like this, the roasted leg of lamb will be crispy on the outside and tender inside," Mamati brushed off the sand from his hands, "You'll know once you taste it later."

After setting up the tents, the other two guides, Old Tu and Da Ming, started checking the vehicle's condition, mainly focusing on the water tank, fuel, and tires, to avoid potential issues during tomorrow's journey.

At eleven in the evening, the hot temperature finally cooled down a bit, and the group of eight gathered together, enjoying the fragrant lamb meat.

After being roasted by the hot sand for two hours, when the aluminum foil was opened, the surface of the leg of lamb had turned golden brown.

The aroma of meat juice mixed with cumin burst forth, causing Duan Pingyu to swallow eagerly. For someone like him from outside, the lamb here was definitely top-notch.

Mamati took out disposable paper bowls and divided some for everyone using a small knife, and the group immediately began feasting.

After dinner, everyone crawled into their tents to rest, skipping steps like washing their faces.

In the summer desert, only the nighttime hours are relatively cool, so they have to make the most of the time to sleep.

Accompanied by the rustling sound of the wind blowing over the dunes, Qi Yun quickly fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, before dawn, the group set off again, still over a hundred kilometers away from their destination.

During this desert expedition, Qi Yun and the others were fortunate, encountering neither sandstorms nor stuck cars.

At around eleven in the evening, the convoy successfully reached the destination, which was the coordinate point mentioned in the intelligence.

This was a relatively flat sandy area, surrounded by some low dunes.

"Boss Qi, we've arrived." Mamati stopped the car and said.

Qi Yun pushed open the car door and stepped out, looking around but seeing nothing unusual about the area.

The outline of the dunes appeared soft under the moonlight, while sparse camelthorn swayed in the breeze on the sand, and the air was filled with a dry scent.

"Boss, why did we come here?" Duan Pingyu also got out of the car, kicking at the sand underfoot.

Qi Yun did not answer his question, instead, he turned to Mamati and asked, "Are you sure it's here?"

"The satellite positioning shows it's right here." Mamati held the GPS device, with the red dot of the coordinates flickering on the current location on the screen, "The error is no more than two kilometers."

Zhan Hongbo squatted down, grasping a handful of sand and rubbing it, speaking in surprise, "The sand in this place seems finer than elsewhere."

Qi Yun turned to look at him, suspiciously asking, "What's the significance of finer sand?"

Zhan Hongbo's gaze swept over the outlines of the surrounding dunes: "In deserts, the stratification of sand typically relates to geological structures. If a fine sand layer exists extensively, it could mean there's an ancient riverbed sediment below, or..."

"Or what?" Duan Pingyu asked next.

Zhan Hongbo pondered and ultimately shook his head: "It's nothing, probably unlikely."

Duan Pingyu opened his mouth but didn't say more.

Qi Yun withdrew his gaze, knowing that impatience won't get the answers, thus ordered everyone: "Let's set up camp first, get the tents up, we'll deal with other matters come morning."

"Alright."

Zhong Rui and the others responded in unison and began taking action.

After dinner, Qi Yun crawled into his tent ready for a rest, but Zhan Hongbo came over, softly calling outside the tent: "Brother Qi, can I chat with you for a bit?"

Qi Yun was slightly taken aback, but nonetheless unzipped the tent and crawled out, looking at the other with some puzzlement: "What do you want to talk about?"

Zhan Hongbo licked his lips, looking at Qi Yun with a gaze resembling seeing a revered teacher, his expression seeming to be filled with intense longing.

Qi Yun felt a bit uneasy under his gaze, stepped back a couple of steps: "Speak quickly if you have something to say, I'm quite tired and a bit sleepy."

Zhan Hongbo rubbed his palms and inexplicably spoke: "I now understand why the teacher suggested I come along with you."

"Why?" Qi Yun raised his eyebrows slightly and asked suspiciously.

"Before we set out, the teacher told me that you might have some clues, I didn't believe it at the time, after all, the Ancient Loulan disappeared over a thousand years ago, and only two or three sites have been discovered up to now." Zhan Hongbo paused for a moment, his gaze becoming even more fervent, "But when I saw the fine sand layer here, I believed it!"

"Brother Qi, you surely know something, don't you!"

"You're right to not believe it; Old Wei was teasing you." Qi Yun was a bit speechless, sighed, "If I had any definite clues, I wouldn't have brought just a few people here."

"But, you said earlier, after seeing the fine sand layer here, you believed it, why's that?"

Chapter 360: Satellite City

The next day, early morning.

Qi Yun looked at the endless dunes ahead, with a slight frown.

The depths of the desert all looked the same, seemingly without anything special...

Although they had arrived, the intel only provided a coordinate, and he couldn't even be sure what he was looking for or if there was anything here at all.

If it weren't for the overlap with the location on the shipwreck map, he probably wouldn't have made this trip.

Zhan Hongbo squatted down, running his fingers through the sand: "This sand is prismatic, with erosive pits on the surface, a typical feature of ancient riverbed deposits."

"But the key is its distribution range." He raised his arm and pointed northwest, "From here to the Yadan Group we passed, within a straight line distance of fifteen kilometers, it's all this fine sand. Natural deposition couldn't form such a regular rectangular distribution."

Zhan Hongbo took out a small notebook he carried, flipping to a page with some written notes.

"Last year, during the Taklamakan exploration, I found a similar sand layer structure on the outskirts of the Niya Ruins. During the Han Dynasty, some city-states in the Western Regions mixed sand, clay, and water to build walls. We must be close to an ancient riverbed here."

Qi Yun also squatted, grabbing a handful of sand: "So you're speculating... there might be ancient city ruins below?"

"Sounds unbelievable, right?" Zhan Hongbo chuckled, "Initially, I also found it unlikely."

"After dinner yesterday, I reviewed some earlier notes, and only then confirmed that the situation here is very similar to the outskirts of the Niya Ruins."

"So I speculate that beneath this sand layer, there are at least artificially modified building foundations."

Qi Yun nodded slowly, thinking that it was fortunate Wei Xueming sent someone like him along, otherwise with only amateurs like himself, they'd be groping in the dark even if they got here.

Zhan Hongbo flipped through his small notebook, continuing to explain: "This place is precisely located at the intersection of the ancient Peacock River's old route and the northern route of the Silk Road."

"The 'Commentary on the Water Classic' from the Northern Wei dynasty mentioned that Loulan City was built by the water, with superb craftsmanship. The 'Satellite City' recorded in historical documents is likely in this area."

"Satellite City?" Qi Yun appeared puzzled.

"Yes." Zhan Hongbo sighed, "It used to be a very prosperous city on the Ancient Silk Road, but later it suddenly disappeared in the long river of history..."

"Boss Qi!"

Amid their conversation, they heard Mamati's voice from behind.

Qi Yun turned to him: "What's up?"

"Nothing much." Mamati smiled, handing over two bottles of water, "I just wanted to let you know that this area is basically the hottest part of Lop Nur. By noon, the surface temperature can exceed seventy degrees."

"So if you have any plans, try to carry them out in the early morning or late afternoon, otherwise, it's very easy to get heatstroke."

Qi Yun nodded, reaching out to take the water: "Alright, thank you."

"I won't disturb you then; call me if you need anything." Mamati turned and walked towards the camp.

Qi Yun unscrewed the cap and took a few sips, gazing at the endless dunes: "Even if there are ruins below, how do we determine the specific location?"

Zhan Hongbo also tilted his head back and gulped down half a bottle of water, wiped his mouth, and replied: "Some written records were unearthed in the Loulan Ancient City ruins, including a passage that says, 'The city's foundation is indicated by the red sand, aligned with the solar track.'"

"What does that mean?" Qi Yun asked.

"According to most scholars' guesses and interpretations, it roughly implies that the ancient Loulan people used the sun to orient their city, basing the construction on the sun's position at noon on the summer solstice."

"The sun?" Qi Yun was momentarily stunned, feeling it was becoming more and more elusive.

Zhan Hongbo nodded: "Yes, the ancient Loulan people worshiped the Sun God, believing that the sun's trajectory contained divine messages."

Saying this, he took a folding protractor and tape measure from his backpack, squatting on the sand to measure the sun's altitude angle.

"It's nine in the morning now, the solar azimuth angle is about 68 degrees, and the altitude angle is about 52 degrees..."

"I need a stick!"

Qi Yun turned towards the camp and shouted, "Zhong Rui, bring a stick over."

"Okay!" Zhong Rui responded, soon jogging over with a tent pole, "Will this do?"

"It's fine." Zhan Hongbo took the pole, inserted it vertically into the sand, and then used a tape measure to measure the length of the shadow.

"The ancient Loulan people might have used a similar method to determine the central axis, and on the summer solstice at noon, when the shadow of the pole shortens to 0.5 meters, the direction of the shadow is likely the city's direction."

Qi Yun took out his phone to check the calendar, reminding, "But today is not the summer solstice."

Zhan Hongbo sat down on the sand, took a ballpoint pen from his pocket, and started scribbling in his notebook.

"No problem, we can calculate it; based on precession calculations, in 400 AD, Loulan's summer solstice was on June 22nd, with a solar altitude angle of about 82 degrees. We can extrapolate from the current shadow length..."

Zhan Hongbo rambled on, but Qi Yun didn't understand a word. However, he didn't interrupt, instead taking out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lighting one up.

After more than ten minutes, Zhan Hongbo closed the notebook, turned to Qi Yun, his tone excited: "I have a way!"

"What way?" Qi Yun turned his head and asked.

"I need to stay here today to observe the shadow of this stick." Zhan Hongbo got up from the sand, dusting the sand off his rear, "When the sun sets, I'll likely be able to estimate the approximate location of the structure!"

Qi Yun looked up at the sky; it was just past nine, and it was already starting to heat up. Staying under the sun all day would definitely turn them into mummies.