

Middle Age 591

Chapter 591: A Special Space

Due to the interference from the energy field, all electronic devices have lost functionality, even the watches can't display properly, so Qi Yun and his group didn't know how long they've been walking in the tunnel.

They've already rested twice along the way, and everyone is somewhat tired.

Gradually, the flashlight began to flicker, dimming intermittently.

Ignacio frowned, observing the surrounding rock walls: "The energy field here is getting stronger."

"If anyone feels headache or dizziness, make sure to say it immediately."

"Staying in such an environment for long can damage our nerves and body functions."

Before he finished speaking, he couldn't help but rub his temples, seeming paler than before.

"Professor, are you okay?" An Zai beside him quickly supported him, asking with concern.

Ignacio waved his hand: "Just a little dizzy, I can still hang on."

Seeing this, Qi Yun frowned too, the situation was becoming concerning, not only were they about to lose flashlight illumination, but someone was also starting to feel unwell.

Who knows how much longer this tunnel is? Should they keep moving forward?

If someone collapses before reaching the end, it could lead to severe consequences...

At this moment, De Gaulle returned from the bend ahead and said to Qi Yun: "The wind ahead is getting stronger, we should be close to getting out."

In a closed mountain tunnel, significant airflow only occurs near an exit or a large cavity.

If you can significantly feel the wind, it indicates you're close to open ground.

Qi Yun looked at Ignacio, planning to ask for his opinion, but he already spoke first: "Let's go, don't worry about me, I'll speak up if I can't hold on."

Qi Yun nodded, making a decision: "Brother Quan, mark the time, we'll move forward for another half hour, if we don't reach the exit, we'll head back!"

After hearing this, De Gaulle did not object either, and everyone took fluorescent sticks from their backpacks for lighting, then continued forward.

Qi Yun and his team were well-prepared with equipment this time, not only having flashlights and fluorescent sticks, but also bringing gasoline, which could be used to make temporary torches in emergencies.

Without a timer and unable to see the sun or other reference points, how do they keep time?

The only way is to count seconds, as Brother Quan walked, he silently counted numbers in his mind.

As they passed that bend, they indeed felt the wind seemed more noticeable.

Everyone continued for quite a while, then suddenly the person in the front stopped.

"Did you smell that?"

Those words caught everyone's curiosity, and they all stopped, taking deep sniffs.

The wind blowing toward them seemed to carry a peculiar odor.

"Seems like... smells like soil!"

Qi Yun's eyes lit up; the tunnel was filled with rubble, such humid earthy smells would only be found in fresh outdoor environments.

"Go! The exit should be nearby!" De Gaulle shouted excitedly, leading the way upfront.

No one lingered anymore; they all wanted to escape the dark, daunting tunnel as soon as possible.

The further they walked, the stronger the smell became.

Gradually, it seemed a faint light appeared at the end of the darkness ahead.

"Light! There's light ahead! We've reached the exit!"

De Gaulle and the two researchers shared joyful expressions, running towards the area where light penetrated.

As they approached, casting light with their fluorescent sticks, they saw the tunnel's exit blocked by a thick mass of verdant plants, forming a wall of intertwined vines as thick as a wrist.

"Go, clear these things away!" De Gaulle ordered an aide.

The latter immediately stepped forward, retrieved a folding engineer's shovel from his backpack, and started hacking at the vines.

The blade of the shovel struck the vines with a muffled "thud," only leaving a shallow mark on the stem; the exceedingly tough vine had resilience beyond expectations, slightly swaying where it was struck.

The aide hesitated briefly, then applied more force to the shovel, finally cutting a small notch into the vine, seeping a bit of light green liquid.

A researcher approached, examining the vine and muttering: "The liquid seems fibrous, this vine lacks similarity to those outside..."

While speaking, he dipped some of the green juice, smelling it near his nose, "The odor is distinctive, I think I read a similar description in a book about plants before."

Ignacio heard this and walked over, studying the vine's notch under the fluorescent light: "Let me see."

"This isn't ordinary wild vine, its fiber density is high, possibly altered by the unique environment here."

De Gaulle frowned, attempting to push the vines aside, but found them immovable.

"How do we clear them away?"

Ignacio, not answering immediately, thought for a moment and replied: "Try burning them, plants with strong resilience are usually sensitive to high temperatures; flames can quickly dismantle their fiber structure."

Upon hearing this, An Zai immediately took out a small can of gasoline and a lighter from his backpack.

He poured a bit of gasoline onto a fabric strip, wrapping it around the shovel's wooden handle, igniting it to create a half-meter-high flame.

The flames touching the vines produced a sizzling sound.

The previously firm vines quickly shriveled under the heat, their dark green stems charred, releasing a scent of scorched vegetation.

No further clearing was needed, they simply broke apart on their own.

"It works!" An Zai's eyes lit up, moving closer to the dense vines, where flames swept the area, causing vines to curl and shrink, soon clearing a small gap.

Chapter 592: A Special Space (2)

The light from outside seeped through the gap, and the passage instantly brightened up.

Once these vines were cleared away, everyone eagerly moved to the exit to look outside.

The scene before their eyes stunned everyone instantly...

The West Z Region was already cold and desolate, and plus they were over four thousand meters above sea level halfway up the mountain, theoretically an environment not suitable for plant growth.

But the scene outside the exit was far beyond everyone's expectations.

They saw vast expanses of trees ahead, blocking out the sun.

The tree trunks were extremely thick, requiring at least two or three adults to embrace their circumference, and nearly every tree was like this.

The ground wasn't barren like the previous external world; instead, it was covered with all kinds of wildflowers and weeds, with a sweet floral fragrance lingering in the air.

At a glance, it seemed like they had entered another world...

Everyone widened their eyes, unable to believe the scene before them.

Deep within the Kunlun Mountain, such a place was hidden, and if it weren't for personal experience, anyone would think it's just a tale...

De Gaulle, coming back to his senses, was the first to step out of the passage, muttering to himself, "Is this... the Land of Eternal Life!?"

Qi Yun followed closely behind and, just as he stepped into the environment, the most immediate feeling was "warmth."

The temperature here was estimated to be around twenty degrees, unlike the previous cold external world; it was very comfortable here.

Moreover, the air seemed infused with a special... substance, making breathing here feel refreshing, even more invigorating than oxygen.

Qi Yun turned his head towards Ignacio, who was bending over to pick a wildflower from the ground.

"Professor, why is the climate here so different from the outside?"

Ignacio observed the roots and stems of the wildflower and slowly shook his head, "I can't explain this phenomenon... it's too incredible..."

While speaking, he dug up a handful of soil, rubbed it with his fingers, then brought it close to his nose to smell.

"This soil texture I've never seen before... perhaps it isn't even recorded in books..."

The other two researchers nearby were doing almost the same thing, all studying the amazing scene before them.

Sunlight filtered through the leaves, landing precisely on Qi Yun's face; he instinctively raised his hand to block it, but suddenly to his surprise found the watch on his wrist seemed to be back to normal, the hands no longer erratically moving as they had been in the passage.

"The energy field here seems to have stabilized!"

He immediately informed Ignacio of this discovery, but just as he finished speaking, his pupils suddenly contracted!

"One... one forty! One forty in the afternoon!"

Why is it still one forty!? Is the watch broken?

Qi Yun immediately pulled out his phone for a quick check and was astonished to see that the time displayed on the phone was also one forty!

Even though there was no signal here, preventing the phone from syncing the time online, phones have a built-in clock battery that continuously powers the clock chip, allowing it to accurately keep time even without a signal.

If the watch hands had malfunctioned under the interference of that strong energy field before, what about the time on the phone?

"An Zai, check the time, what time is it now!" Qi Yun called out to An Zai.

Hearing the shout, An Zai came over from the alert position, holstering his handgun while pulling out his phone and lighting up the screen: "Boss, it's one forty now!"

Qi Yun's eyes widened, finding this phenomenon difficult to comprehend.

"What's the matter, boss?" Brother Quan asked with concern upon seeing this.

Qi Yun shook his head, not answering his question, instead raising his head to look at the sun and then asking Brother Quan: "Can you estimate the time based on the position of the sun?"

Brother Quan, unsure of the situation, nodded in response: "Sure."

After speaking, he looked at the sun, then at the shadow cast by a nearby tree, measuring the distance roughly with his steps.

"This season in the West Z region, the midday sun should be slightly southwest. The sun has just passed the southwest central axis point now, and based on the shadow proportion, it should indeed be a little past one in the afternoon."

After hearing this, Qi Yun felt as if a clap of thunder exploded in his mind!

He remembered very clearly that when they first entered the passage and discovered the remains of that German soldier, he had glanced at the time, and the hands on his watch were approximately at one forty.

So much time has passed, but has no time at all elapsed!?

They had walked a long way through the passage, even stopping several times to rest; this made no sense at all...

Qi Yun reported this discovery to Ignacio, hoping to get a reasonable explanation from him, but the result was not as he wished, the latter's face was equally full of astonishment after hearing it.

"This... cannot be explained scientifically..." Ignacio's voice carried a slight tremor, and after a long while, he continued, "Perhaps... perhaps it has to do with the energy field here..."

"I've read similar hypotheses in the literature before, suggesting that 'time-space folds' might occur in extreme environments, but those are just theories without empirical evidence... I never expected to encounter it today."

Beside him, Brother Quan felt a chill run down his spine. A person who wasn't even afraid of going to the battlefield now had a sense of fear welling up inside him upon hearing this news.

That was a fear of the unknown...

Qi Yun worked to calm himself; since answers weren't available, he decided not to dwell on it for now.

He approached De Gaulle, inquiring about the subsequent plans: "Is this the place you're looking for?"

De Gaulle had just finished discussing with the two researchers, seemingly carrying concerns of his own.

He shook his head and slowly said, "I can't be sure at the moment."

"But I have a feeling... it should be here..."

Qi Yun knew this guy was always hiding secrets, so he didn't bother to dig deeper: "Which way should we go now? We don't have much time to waste."

De Gaulle pointed eastward: "Then let's set out, head east!"

Qi Yun asked no more questions, signaling his crew to get ready: "Pack up, prepare to leave."

They continued their journey towards the endless dense forest to the east.

An Zai still walked next to Ignacio, caring for him, while asking curiously, "Professor, is this the Earth's Axis that the mustachioed man was looking for?"

Ignacio adjusted his glasses, glancing at the towering trees surrounding them, before slowly speaking: "This ecological environment is unlike any place I know, and just for that reason alone, it is undoubtedly a unique entity."

"But whether this is Earth's Axis, I don't know. Every unique ecological environment fosters different life forms."

"With vegetation growing so luxuriantly, it's highly likely the animals here are similarly thriving..."

"So we need to be cautious..."

Upon hearing this, An Zai immediately tensed up: "Are you saying dangerous beasts might be here?"

"Not might, there definitely are!" Ignacio replied seriously, "Although we haven't seen any signs of animals yet, this well-balanced ecosystem fulfills all conditions for large creatures to exist."

"As for what type of animals, and whether they're the same species as outside, we'll only know once we see them."

As he finished speaking, they saw De Gaulle and his team, who had been leading the way, stop again.

"There's a discovery here!"

Upon hearing this, Qi Yun exchanged a glance with Ignacio and quickly walked over.

They saw a massive pit on the ground not far away, which looked very much like... the footprint of an elephant.

The pit was nearly half a meter in diameter, with four curved indentations clearly etched into the edge, closely resembling the animal's outline.

The researcher nearby explained, "If this is indeed an elephant's footprint, its weight would exceed ten tons! Possibly even more..."

Chapter 593: Legend and Reality (Two-in-One)

The group continued eastward, occasionally hearing unfamiliar animal calls from the forest, the surrounding scene very much resembling the primeval forest of Shennongjia.

Butterflies and dragonflies, rarely seen outside, were everywhere here.

After walking for a long time, they could no longer see the peak they had come from.

Ignacio looked up at the interwoven branches above and couldn't help but sigh, "The ecological environment here is completely untouched, without a trace of man-made destruction. Such a complete ecological chain is rare in modern society."

Qi Yun also nodded silently, who would have thought that such a pure land would be hidden deep within the Kunlun Mountains.

"Professor, are you familiar with Huaxia mythology?"

Ignacio hesitated for a moment, adjusted his glasses: "Not deeply, but I know some legends, like how the Kunlun Mountain is regarded as the ancestor of all mountains in mythology, and the legend that the Queen Mother of the West resides there."

"The Queen Mother of the West?" An Zai, curious, came closer, "Then is this place the legendary Yaochi Fairyland? It seems quite similar."

Ignacio shook his head upon hearing this and slowly explained, "From a scientific perspective, these mythological descriptions are not necessarily all fabricated. They may be the ancients' interpretation of special natural phenomena."

"For example, the forest we are in now, because it is deep in Kunlun, is less affected by the external climate, with very suitable temperature and humidity, and an intact ecological chain, allowing plants to remain lush for a long time."

"In ancient times, people who had never seen such stable primitive environments easily attributed them to the characteristics of fairylands, including Mount Olympus in European mythology and Mount Sumeru in Indian mythology, all have their own legends."

"Actually, these descriptions in mythology have similarities with the Kunlun forest in front of us. It's just that the ancients used mythology to explain these incomprehensible natural wonders, which is essentially a form of cognitive logic."

Qi Yun smiled and turned to ask, "So you don't actually believe these legends are real?"

"Then why are you determined to come and find that Land of Eternal Life?"

"This..." Ignacio was momentarily speechless.

As a historian, he intrinsically had a desire to explore the truth behind those legends.

Otherwise, he wouldn't have agreed to help Qi Yun decode it without hesitation upon seeing the map, even going so far as to return to Spain just to get his teacher involved.

As ancient items were discovered and the thousand-year-old clues were linked together, he gradually stopped considering it purely a legend.

He was eager to understand the truth behind that map, so he was determined to come and find out no matter what.

As they spoke, the group walked a considerable distance.

Suddenly, Xiao Wu, who was walking beside Qi Yun, stopped, his ears perked up, and pointed ahead to the right saying, "There's the sound of water over there!"

The group followed the direction he pointed, their view completely obstructed by the dense trees, unable to see anything.

"Let's go check it out!" De Gaulle was the first to change direction, leading his men to jog towards where Xiao Wu pointed.

Qi Yun sensed a certain urgency in him but had no time to contemplate it further and quickly signaled everyone to follow.

In less than ten minutes, the trees thinned out in front, and they could clearly hear the sound of flowing water. Then, after passing through a patch of forest, the sight before them suddenly opened up.

It was a stream about three or four meters wide, flowing along the riverbed downward. Looking along the stream, everyone widened their eyes.

A few hundred meters ahead in the valley, a blue lake appeared!

If one word were to describe the lake before them, it would be pure... unimaginably pure.

The lake water was blue beyond description, clear to the bottom, without a trace of impurity, exactly matching the color of the sky.

From afar, it looked like a great blue sapphire embedded in the valley.

Sunlight fell on the lake, refracting a layer of soft halo, even dyeing the stones by the lake a light blue.

Perhaps... the word fairyland was meant to describe the lake before them.

"Found... found it!" De Gaulle's voice trembled, his eyes fixated on the lake as if he was seeing something he dreamed of.

Hearing him, Qi Yun quickly approached and asked, "Is this the Land of Eternal Life!?"

"Yes... this is the Land of Eternal Life!" At this point, De Gaulle no longer concealed, revealing the key information, "Back then Louis I not only had a map drawn but also wrote in his diary about key information on the Land of Eternal Life..."

"It mentioned a lake kissed by the sky, that is the Land of Eternal Life..."

"I found it...."

Qi Yun stared at the lake for a long time, several kilometers wide and almost beyond sight. Although the scenery looked tremendously spectacular, it was still hard to associate it with the four words "Land of Eternal Life."

At the same time, a question arose in his heart: with today's aerospace technology, why had the satellites not discovered such a conspicuous lake?

He shared this doubt with Ignacio, and the latter could not provide a reasonable explanation, speculating only that it was due to the special energy field of the place.

"This lake... doesn't it resemble the legendary Yaochi?" An Zai suddenly asked.

Qi Yun nodded, actually, it did seem quite fitting.

Although many places in the country have lakes called Yaochi, none could compare to the lake before them.

Chapter 594: Legend and Reality (Part 2)

"However, if this were the Jade Pool, there should be the palace of the Queen Mother of the West next to it, but all around are just trees and mountains, not even a shadow of the palace," interjected Da Pao beside him.

In the "Mu Heavenly Son," it's recorded that the Western Zhou Son of Heaven, King Mu of Zhou, Ji Man, once rode eight steeds that could travel thirty thousand li a day, departing from Beijing and traveling thousands of miles along Tianshan to meet the Queen Mother of the West at the Jade Pool.

When King Mu of the Western Zhou and his entourage arrived, the Queen Mother of the West, dressed in splendid attire, stood by the Jade Pool to welcome them with the most grand etiquette, and then invited them into her palace for a feast.

King Mu presented the Queen Mother of the West with a large quantity of silk goods and precious gifts such as jade tablets and discs, pleasing her greatly.

Because the scenery of the Jade Pool was so breathtakingly beautiful, King Mu became enchanted, indulging in revelry day after day and forgetting to return...

So according to these ancient texts, there should indeed be a palace by the Jade Pool.

Just as everyone was immersed in speculation about the Jade Pool, a sudden tremor, akin to an earthquake, came from behind, accompanied by the crackling sound of tree trunks being broken, as if something heavy was crashing through the forest, causing even the stones on the ground to tremble.

"Mooo!" A deep roar erupted from the forest, making everyone's ears buzz with the reverberation.

Immediately following, the tremor became more intense. The trees at the edge of the forest fell in waves, as several enormous elephants charged out from among the trees.

Their bodies were covered in gray-brown skin, swinging their long trunks. Their four feet stomped on the ground, each step causing the earth to quake, and the trees along their path shattered into flying branches.

Typically, an adult elephant stands about three meters tall, and even the largest African elephants don't exceed five meters, but these huge creatures charging towards us were almost as tall as a two-story building, nearly twice the size of those in zoos.

"Not good! They're coming our way!" shouted Brother Quan first.

Qi Yun stared at the charging elephants, his heart pounding wildly. Before he could react, Brother Quan and Xiao Wu grabbed him on either side and started running frantically towards the valley.

Behind them, Da Pao directly hoisted Ignacio onto his back and sprinted after them.

De Gaulle and the others did the same, fleeing for their lives towards the valley, knowing that even a slight bump from these behemoths might shatter their bones.

The group fled chaotically. Against such colossal beings, the weapons they brought were like toys, utterly useless.

They didn't dare stop until they reached a slope in the valley ahead.

"No... they're not coming for us, they're heading towards the river," Da Pao said, setting Ignacio down and catching his breath.

Qi Yun looked up into the distance and indeed saw the group of enormous elephants heading toward the opposite side of the stream. Their massive figures gradually diminished and soon disappeared at the forest's edge.

He plopped down on a stone, still shaken, and took out a cigarette to calm himself.

"The footprints we saw earlier in the forest were left by these guys, right?"

"Judging by their size, it's very likely," Ignacio nodded, also sitting down to support himself. "But... judging by their earlier state, it seemed like they were fleeing from some danger, just like us."

"Fleeing from danger?!" Qi Yun froze, holding his lighter mid-air.

What could possibly threaten creatures that enormous? What terrifying thing could be chasing them?

He cautiously peeked in the direction they had come from, but after a thorough scan, found nothing.

"Xiao Wu, did you see anything chasing them earlier?"

Among everyone present, Xiao Wu, trained in internal martial arts, had the most acute senses. Nothing escaped his eyes and ears.

Xiao Wu slowly shook his head. "I couldn't see clearly, just caught a glimpse of a shadow, and it vanished in a flash."

Vanished in a flash?

Qi Yun's expression grew heavy. What kind of creature could frighten elephants into fleeing and move so swiftly?

He hoped he wouldn't encounter such a thing...

He put the cigarette back into its pack, not wanting to spoil the environment, then turned to De Gaulle and asked, "Since we're sure this is the place, what's the plan?"

After what just happened, he realized that this place held not only ethereal beauty but also hidden dangers. They needed to achieve their goal and leave as soon as possible.

"I don't know either." De Gaulle put down his water bottle and sighed. "The diary my ancestor found was incomplete, and the information I have is limited."

Qi Yun frowned at this. From their very first meeting, this guy had been reluctant to share more than a snippet of information each time.

Now he even claimed he didn't have a follow-up plan, which Qi Yun didn't quite believe.

"Why don't we find a place to rest first and decide tomorrow," De Gaulle suggested.

Qi Yun glanced at him, then looked at the sun in the sky. It was already close to seven o'clock, with about two or three hours until sunset, so he nodded in agreement.

Nighttime was indeed not ideal for exploring, especially in such an unknown place.

Given the earlier turn of events, they felt that the edge of the forest was not necessarily safer than the lakeside, so they finally chose a relatively flat area at the bottom of the valley to set up camp.

They backed up against the hillside, providing an open view that allowed them to observe any distant movements while staying close enough to the lake for easy access to water.

Brother Quan took An Zai on a patrol around the area, gathering some dry wood along the way. Then they began to build a fire and prepare a meal.

The flames crackled as Qi Yun poked at the campfire with a stick and asked De Gaulle, "Regarding the secret of immortality, your family has been pursuing it for so long. There must be some clue, right?"

"At least you should have some hypothesis?"

De Gaulle sensed Qi Yun probing him and answered sincerely, "From Louis I to now, more than a thousand years have passed. Many events occurred in between, and numerous clues were lost during wars, including that family diary."

"So we don't have complete information, only fragments to guess from. The secret of immortality... must be related to some location or object within this area."

Qi Yun watched for any changes in his expression, trying to detect any signs of deception, but De Gaulle appeared forthright, making it hard to find any obvious flaws.

He redirected his gaze to the fire, poked it with the stick, and said no more.

After a simple meal, darkness fell. Qi Yun initially thought of assigning Xiao Wu and Brother Quan to keep watch, as vigilance was necessary in such an environment.

However, De Gaulle volunteered to take on the task, offering to let his men stand guard for the night.

Qi Yun didn't refuse and agreed with a smile.

Taking the opportunity of stepping away to relieve himself, he secretly pulled Xiao Wu aside, instructing, "I suspect this guy plans to do something behind our backs tonight. Keep a close watch on them."

Xiao Wu nodded silently, indicating his understanding.

The two didn't talk much more. Pretending to adjust his pant leg, Qi Yun added, "Don't act rashly. Get me if something happens." Then he turned back to the camp.

Returning to his tent, Qi Yun didn't fall asleep immediately. Instead, he reflected on everything that had occurred that day.

The mysterious passage, WWII-era German soldiers, the peculiar energy field, the inexplicable disappearance of time, and this seemingly ethereal realm...

After about an hour, complete silence fell outside, even the crackle of the fire waned, leaving only a deathly stillness.

Unconsciously, Qi Yun drifted into a hazy sleep.

He dreamed of a vague scene: a magnificent palace richly adorned with resplendent gemstones, encircled by lotus-shaped structures, breathtaking in its brilliance.

Just as he planned to approach and investigate, someone suddenly called his name.

"Boss."

"Boss!"

Groggily, Qi Yun opened his eyes to find Xiao Wu inside the tent, shaking his arm.

Chapter 595: Coincidence?

"They have four people heading towards the lake! It looks like they're preparing to get into the water."

Qi Yun heard Xiao Wu's report and instantly became alert.

That guy De Gaulle volunteered to keep watch, clearly intending to play tricks. Obviously, the bastard lied earlier; he surely has key information. Otherwise, why would he go for a swim in the lake in the middle of the night?

"Into the water? Do they have diving equipment?" Qi Yun asked with a frown.

Xiao Wu nodded: "Two of them are wearing wetsuits and carrying oxygen tanks."

Upon hearing this, Qi Yun instantly remembered the large bags carried by De Gaulle's two bodyguards. When they were picked up at the airport, this group was already carrying those two bags.

Initially, he didn't think much of it, assuming they were just ordinary carry-ons. Now, it seems the bags contained pre-prepared diving gear.

De Gaulle knew from the beginning that the clues to the Land of Eternal Life were hidden in the lake.

"Let's go to the lake!" Qi Yun immediately stood up, grabbing his coat and putting it on. "Get Brother Quan and the others up."

Xiao Wu turned and went toward the other tents, and before long, Brother Quan, An Zai, and the others quietly gathered around.

The group hurried toward the lake under the moonlight, their steps light to avoid alerting De Gaulle and his team prematurely.

It was now three in the morning, and everything was silent; even the insects and birds had stopped making noise.

The moon in this area seemed particularly bright; even without flashlights, they could clearly see the path ahead.

When they were over a hundred meters from the lake, they saw four dark figures moving by the shore. Two of them were already in wetsuits, bending over to check their oxygen tanks, while the other two held flashlights, shining the beams straight onto the lake, as if confirming something.

Qi Yun raised his hand to signal everyone to stop and crouched in the bushes, keeping an eye on the movements by the shore.

"What are they waiting for?" An Zai whispered, chewing a piece of grass. "They're all geared up; why aren't they going into the water?"

Qi Yun squinted for a moment, unable to decipher their plan.

"No rush, let's wait and see what tricks they're up to."

The group fell silent, their eyes fixed intently on the figures by the shore.

After about ten more minutes, the surface of the lake suddenly changed.

The moonlight, which had been spread out, seemed to be drawn to something, slowly gathering towards the center of the lake, eventually forming a clear circular light spot on the water's surface.

More peculiarly, mist began rising from the water beneath the light spot, gradually emerging upward.

"This... what is this..." An Zai was too shocked to speak.

Qi Yun's eyes widened, unable to comprehend the scene unfolding before him.

Is this an unusual natural phenomenon, or is there really something strange beneath the lake's surface?

He subconsciously moved closer for a better look, not noticing a protruding stone at his feet.

"Crack!"

The sound, trivial under normal circumstances, was particularly piercing in the stillness of three in the morning.

By the shore, De Gaulle froze, quickly turning his head toward the bushes where Qi Yun and his group were hiding, sweeping his flashlight beam in their direction.

Fortunately, the bushes were dense enough; Qi Yun and his group quickly lay flat, using the bushes for cover and avoiding exposure.

De Gaulle swept his flashlight through the bushes a couple of times but found nothing unusual. He assumed it was just an animal making noise and turned back to continue watching the lake.

At this time, the moon projection at the center of the lake seemed to become brighter, the mist rising faster, gradually forming a vague column of light above the light spot, reaching toward the moon.

The two individuals in wetsuits, seeing this, immediately walked into the lake with their oxygen tanks, their figures gradually vanishing on the lake's surface.

"Boss, should we go over and take them down? As long as we control that De Gaulle, even if they find something underwater, they'll have to hand it over obediently," An Zai suggested beside him.

Qi Yun thought for two seconds, then slowly shook his head, rejecting the suggestion.

As An Zai said, controlling De Gaulle would certainly make his subordinates hesitate; those brought to this place by him must be trusted followers and wouldn't abandon him.

However, the two parties are not outright enemies and have cooperated several times.

Even if De Gaulle deliberately withheld some information and acted secretly, it doesn't warrant resorting to kidnapping.

Such actions would somewhat contradict his principles.

"Let's wait until those two come out of the lake before making a move."

Qi Yun decided to catch them in the act and then question them from a moral high ground.

Given their cooperation, they couldn't possibly act all to themselves without reason.

If De Gaulle, at fault, still doesn't come clean, Qi Yun would not play along anymore; he'd directly take what they found in the lake and leave.

The Kunlun Mountain belongs to Huaxia, so seizing what was found there on behalf of Huaxia wouldn't be wrong, right?

De Gaulle, clearly unaware of the scheming in the bushes, stood with his hands on his hips, staring at the lake, occasionally checking his watch.

After about forty minutes, ripples suddenly emerged on the lake surface, and the two in wetsuits surfaced from the water.

"Let's go!" Qi Yun whispered, getting up and walking towards the shore.

They no longer bothered to conceal their presence, and their footsteps were particularly clear in the quiet night.

Hearing the noise, De Gaulle turned his head, saw Qi Yun and his group, and his face instantly changed, leaving him stunned.

"Mr. Qi... Qi, why are you here?"

Qi Yun sneered: "If you can come, why can't I?"

With that, he looked at the two who had just come ashore, observing that their hands were empty and they had nothing with them.

Chapter 596: Is It a Coincidence? _2

Qi Yun furrowed his brow, turned his head and stared at De Gaulle, asking, "Not planning to give me an explanation?"

"Explanation? Explanation of what?" De Gaulle chuckled twice awkwardly, trying to appear calm, "I just thought this lake looked peculiar during the day, so I asked them to go down and investigate."

Qi Yun's face darkened; he was too lazy to poke through his pretense, speaking with seriousness, "You'd better think carefully before answering me."

"If you continue to refuse to reveal the truth, then there's no point in continuing our collaboration."

"After we leave tomorrow, I'll immediately send someone to seal off the entrance to this place. You shouldn't doubt my ability to do that, right?"

De Gaulle's expression froze, the arguments he was planning to make swallowed back down.

He certainly believed in Qi Yun's capability to lock this place down; the disturbance in Japan from a few days ago showed that this guy was quite influential—so much that even Softbank and Mitsubishi stood by him.

And that's just his influence abroad; his domestic influence need not be mentioned...

After a long silence, he nodded bitterly, "Alright... I'll tell you everything later."

Qi Yun gave him another look, finally turned and left without saying a word.

Apart from Xiao Wu still hidden in the dark, Brother Quan and the others also followed behind heading back to the camp.

Back at the camp, the campfire still had some embers; Qi Yun added some dry wood, which snapped and crackled as it reignited.

After a while, Xiao Wu returned and nodded at him.

Soon after, De Gaulle also came over and sat across from the fire.

He hesitated for a long time before taking a notebook from his backpack and pushed it in front of Qi Yun: "This is a copy of Louis I's diary, recording all the clues about the Land of Eternal Life."

Qi Yun picked up the notebook and flipped it open; the text seemed to be in French, which he couldn't understand, so he shot a glance at De Gaulle and put the notebook down.

Chapter 597: It Turns Out They're All the Same Place

The firewood crackled, casting a surprised expression on Qi Yun's face.

Ignacio, seeing his expression, quickly asked, "What's wrong? Did you discover something?"

De Gaulle, sitting opposite, also looked at him with a puzzled gaze.

It took Qi Yun a long time to come back to his senses, finding the matter rather perplexing.

Could it really just be a coincidence?

It's not impossible...

The ancients said that what you think about during the day, you will dream of at night. Perhaps he had seen this city somewhere before, maybe it was a similar photo on the internet, or maybe a scene from a movie.

During the day, An Zai and the others mentioned Jade Pool and palaces, which caused him to dream about those images...

"It's nothing, just that the last frame looks a bit familiar."

"Where have you seen it!?" De Gaulle pressed eagerly.

Qi Yun glanced at him and slowly shook his head.

He didn't answer the question or mention the dream, as even he found it too far-fetched.

Realizing he couldn't get any more useful information, De Gaulle, having explained the map clues to Qi Yun, decided to leave and join his subordinates to study the video content.

After the other party left, Qi Yun lit a cigarette, took a couple of puffs, and turned to Ignacio, asking, "Professor, do you know of any city that is composed of an eight-petal lotus shape?"

"Eight-petal lotus?" Ignacio scratched the sexy little moustache on his cheek, furrowing his brow in thought for a while, "A city with an eight-petal lotus design... is almost nonexistent among existing ancient architecture."

Qi Yun took another puff: "What about undiscovered ones? Is there any city in legends with an eight-petal lotus design?"

"Legends!?" Ignacio crossed his arms, this time thinking for a long time.

Qi Yun quietly smoked, not disturbing his thoughts.

Suddenly, Ignacio sat up straight with bright eyes: "I remember now!"

"There is indeed a city in legend, composed of an eight-petal lotus design!"

"Which city!?" Qi Yun turned his head in surprise.

He originally asked casually and didn't expect it to actually match.

Ignacio, instead of directly answering, asked excitedly, "Have you heard of Shambala?"

"Shambala?" Qi Yun was stunned, "The Shambala in Buddhism?"

Ignacio nodded, his voice filled with uncontrollable excitement: "Yes! That's it!"

"Before I came to Huaxia, I once taught at Delhi University in India for a while, where I learned a lot about ancient Indian culture."

"There is an ancient Indian Buddhist mysterious legend that speaks of a sacred land—Shambala—hidden north of the Himalayas, near the Kunlun Mountain in western Tibet!"

"The location matches exactly where we are now!"

"Moreover, I saw on an ancient mural, the main city of the Shambala Kingdom—Jialoba City—is composed of an eight-petal lotus design."

"So, this space might really be the legendary Shambala!"

Qi Yun, shocked, digested the information Ignacio had just shared, not even noticing his cigarette had burned to the filter.

He originally thought the ruins underwater were just ordinary ancient remains, never expecting them to be connected with the legendary Shambala.

But analyzing as Ignacio did, everything seemed to match...

Even the dream matched, as he had seen many videos about Shambala online, possibly including one with a city in an eight-petal lotus design...

Spit flying, Ignacio continued: "If this is Shambala, then the ancient Sanskrit on the city under the lake can be explained."

"According to descriptions in some ancient texts, the son of the Sun King, the first king of the Shambala Kingdom—King Moon Wisdom, studied the Kalachakra Tantra, one of the esoteric Buddhist texts, under Shakyamuni Buddha in southern India, so he would naturally understand ancient Sanskrit."

Qi Yun opened his mouth, still finding it hard to believe: "So... this really is the legendary Shambala?"

"Based on the current clues, I speculate there is a high probability it is," Ignacio, as a scientific researcher, maintained a very rigorous attitude, "But to fully confirm, we might need to conduct detailed exploration of the underwater city."

"And..."

He paused and continued: "In Buddhism, Shambala symbolizes a pure land beyond the impurities of the world, a place of liberation beyond the cycle of birth and death."

"This also aligns with Buddhism's understanding of immortality."

Qi Yun pondered the meaning in his words: "So... Louis I, including the Gwen Clan, what they've been seeking—the Land of Eternal Life—is Shambala."

"And the immortality Shambala represents is not physical immortality but a kind of spiritual enlightenment?"

"Yes," Ignacio confirmed the theory, "Actually, not only Buddhism, many religious interpretations of immortality refer to a transcendence of the spirit."

"My teacher, when first encountering that map, once said that this so-called immortality is likely spiritual."

"This..." Qi Yun was at a loss for words.

Even though he initially believed there could be no such thing as immortality in this world.

Yet, uncovering the mystery left him with an indescribable emptiness.

This description may be vague, but think of it as like lying home bored on a weekend, rewarding yourself suddenly... it's the feeling after, which is Qi Yun's current mood...

Chapter 598: Turns Out It's All the Same Place (2)

His gaze fell on the flickering flames of the campfire. After a moment of silence, he said, "So, those people have been busy for so long, only to misunderstand the meaning of immortality? Or rather, they've been deceived by the words in the legend?"

The Gwen Clan spent countless effort over dozens of generations, paid countless prices, only to find that the immortality they sought was actually an intangible transcendence of the spirit.

One wonders if De Gaulle could accept this news...

"It can't really be called a deception." Ignacio shook his head, with a touch of lament in his voice. "The accounts of Shambala have always been obscure, and with the oral transmission by people over the ages, it's easy to be misinterpreted."

"Those who are already obsessed with power and wealth naturally hope for a real form of immortality."

Qi Yun sighed at his words: "Yes, throughout history, those who pursued immortality were the ones at the top of the pyramid, while the poor just wanted it to end as soon as possible."

The most famous ones—Qin Shi Huang, Emperor Wu of Han, and even Genghis Khan and King of Loulan, who found those two key clues—weren't they all holders of power? Their pursuit of immortality was merely to hold onto power and wealth forever...

"Now it seems that the Land of Eternal Life sought by the Gwen Clan, the Shambala of Buddhist legend, and the Earth's axis that the little mustache is obsessed with are all actually the same place..."

Ignacio nodded: "Yes, although these legends are quite mythical and somewhat disconnected from reality, it cannot be denied that this space is indeed very special."

"The ecosystem here is unlike anything seen in the outside world. If researched thoroughly, there may be discoveries beyond imagination."

"But..." he said, hesitating briefly as he looked up at Qi Yun, "If possible, I hope we can keep the news about this place secret and not let it become a piece of cake for capitalism."

"This could be the last pure land on Earth..."

Ignacio's voice was soft, his eyes full of earnestness.

Qi Yun was taken aback for a moment, then understood what he meant.

The ecological environment of this space is more beautiful than those fairylands depicted in TV dramas. Without considering its research value, the commercial value alone is incalculable.

At that time, environmental destruction is inevitable, as seen with the Paradise Lake on the ancient Usun Road today.

"I understand what you mean. My original purpose was also just to uncover this secret. I never intended to destroy it." Qi Yun replied seriously, "I'll find a way to communicate with De Gaulle."

"Good, thank you." Satisfied with the answer, Ignacio stood up and yawned, "It's getting late, I need to rest a bit more."

"You've worked hard." Qi Yun felt apologetic for waking him up in the middle of the night and taking up so much of his time.

Ignacio waved it off and walked into a nearby tent.

After he left, Qi Yun looked at the dancing flames, contemplating how to persuade De Gaulle to give up on this place.

And the city at the bottom of the lake.

Since immortality is a lie, the miraculous scenes seen on the lake surface are most likely an unknown natural phenomenon, or perhaps there is some special mechanism or device at the lake bottom.

After thinking it over, Qi Yun stood up and walked towards the large tent still lit up ahead.

Inside the tent, De Gaulle and his people were indeed still studying the video footage taken underwater.

Qi Yun called him aside and told him about the conclusions reached with Ignacio earlier.

De Gaulle was stunned in place, unable to recover for a long time.

The secret that the family had been chasing for hundreds of years turned out to be so absurd.

He didn't want to believe it was true...

After a long time, De Gaulle stared intently at Qi Yun, his tone serious: "Is what you said true?"

Qi Yun noticed that he might have a hard time accepting it at first, so he shrugged: "You can ask the two experts you brought with you if it's true or not."

"As long as you confirm that the city at the lake bottom is indeed in the shape of an eight-petal lotus, then it's most likely accurate."

"To further verify, it might be necessary to find key clues inside the city."

De Gaulle stared at Qi Yun for a few seconds, then quickly walked over to the two researchers and repeated Qi Yun and Ignacio's theory.

Their expressions were very surprised when they heard it, clearly, they were aware of the legend of Shambala.

After a moment, De Gaulle returned to Qi Yun's side, his face complicatedly saying, "Tomorrow night, I want to go down there myself and take a look."

Qi Yun knew this guy wouldn't give up so easily, so he nodded: "Okay, I'll go with you then."

Even he was very curious about the legendary Shambala Royal City, wanting to see it for himself.

After all, they're already here...

...

The next day, after breakfast, Qi Yun assigned Niu Da a task, asking him and An Zai to deliver a message to Chen Wei first.

Yesterday, when they were in the passage, considering that unexpected situations might arise ahead, Qi Yun had Chen Wei wait outside for news. If they hadn't come out by nightfall today, he would come in with a team for rescue.

Niu Da was initially hesitant. With him and An Zai gone, Qi Yun would only have Brother Quan, Xiao Wu, and Da Pao left as his combat power, while De Gaulle had five or six people.

It wasn't until Xiao Wu picked up a stone and crushed it into powder with his palm that Niu Da swallowed his words.

Without firearms on the opposing side, Xiao Wu's ability should be enough to keep the boss safe.

"You two be careful on the road and don't be reckless."

"And, keep everything about this place strictly confidential. If everything goes smoothly, we'll be out by tomorrow."

The two stood at attention and solemnly saluted Qi Yun: "Yes!"

After they left, Ignacio suggested exploring the nearby area, and considering safety concerns, Qi Yun took Brother Quan and Da Pao to go with him.

As for De Gaulle and his team, they were still in the tent, engrossed in studying the ancient city under the lake. Scientific research clearly wasn't as essential as their goal.

Qi Yun and his group climbed out of the valley and returned to the edge of the forest from the previous day.

Ignacio squatted on the ground, examining the scene where the elephant herd fled yesterday.

But after examining for a while, he saw nothing but elephant footprints without any traces of other creatures.

"What could it be that would cause such large elephants to flee in panic?" he murmured, frowning.

Qi Yun rubbed his chin, scanned the surroundings, then looked up at the sky: "Could it be some kind of bird?"

Upon hearing Qi Yun's guess, Ignacio thought for a moment and then shook his head: "Probably not. If it could threaten the elephants, its size shouldn't be much smaller than the elephants. Currently, there are no known birds of similar size."

Qi Yun chuckled: "You said it yourself, there's nothing like it in the known natural world, but this place is unknown."

Ignacio was taken aback: "Well, you have a point."

After lingering for a bit, they headed in another direction, and along the way, they encountered some animals living in the jungle, like squirrels, rabbits, and a few colorful, unidentified birds.

Without exception, these creatures were much larger than their counterparts outside, and their appearances weren't exactly the same.

The small animals didn't panic upon seeing humans, merely sauntering into the bushes. Evidently, they hadn't yet encountered the treacherous nature of two-legged creatures.

Ignacio collected some animal hair, feces, and some moss-like microorganisms along the way, intending to conduct research once outside.

Time flew by, and soon the sun was directly overhead.

For better or worse, the group made their way along the forest's edge for most of the day, yet aside from the elephants from yesterday, they didn't come across any other large animals.

Seeing that it was getting late, the group started making their way back to camp.

Shortly after their departure, a pair of blue eyes emerged from the dense forest, gazing intently in the direction where Qi Yun and his group had left...

Chapter 599: An Ordinary-Looking Stone

3:00 a.m., by the lake.

De Gaulle had already donned his diving gear; he was going to personally take a look at the city under the lake.

Initially, Qi Yun also planned to go down for a look, but he was unanimously opposed by Brother Quan and Xiao Wu, as he had no prior diving experience, and the depth of thirty to forty meters posed a significant danger.

Moreover, there was only one set of diving gear left; they couldn't go with him and couldn't ensure Qi Yun's safety.

After some discussion, they finally decided that Brother Quan would go instead.

The spotlight by the lake illuminated the water's surface brightly. With the experience from the previous night, De Gaulle didn't wait for the moon to shine on the center of the lake and submerged into the water ahead of time.

Once the two swam a certain distance, sure enough, the lake surface began to rise with a bluish mist that spread slowly along the water surface, soon enveloping that area.

"Professor, why does this kind of mist only appear at specific times?" Qi Yun turned his head and asked Ignacio beside him.

Ignacio, his gaze fixed on the blue mist spreading on the lake, thought for a moment and replied, "I speculate there are two possibilities."

"The first is the temperature difference. At this time, the lake surface has the lowest water temperature, and the stone walls of the city under the lake may contain heat-absorbing substances. The meeting of hot and cold air will form mist, resulting in what you see now."

He paused and added, "The second possibility is related to microorganisms in the water. The blue spots in the video might be a kind of luminescent plankton that may only float to the surface at certain times."

"When these organisms gather in sufficient quantities, their phosphorescence colors the mist blue."

"I see..." Qi Yun nodded thoughtfully.

As the two spoke, De Gaulle and Brother Quan's figures vanished from the lake surface.

Qi Yun glanced at his watch, then sat on the rocky beach to wait patiently.

After this exploration, he planned to leave this place tomorrow. Having uncovered its secrets, there was no need to disrupt its balance further.

Recalling those fearless little animals observed in the forest during the day, and what Ignacio said about a closed ecosystem, he suddenly felt that not being disturbed was the best conclusion for this mysterious realm.

The mist on the lake surface gradually dissipated, and everything returned to tranquility.

The oxygen tanks Brother Quan and the others brought were not large and could be used for only forty to fifty minutes in the thirty-meter-deep environment at most.

Just as it neared 4:00 a.m., there was suddenly movement in the water, and then Brother Quan's head emerged, followed closely by De Gaulle, gasping heavily.

His expression looked somewhat complicated, neither as excited as anticipated nor disappointed, more like a peace that comes when the dust settles...

As soon as they got ashore, Brother Quan began reporting the situation below: "There is something strange above that city. As soon as you approach the wall's top, you are pushed away by an undercurrent, and it's impossible to swim over."

"We swam around the perimeter and could only see the rough outline of the city. The overall structure is indeed shaped like eight lotus flowers."

Ignacio, listening nearby, clenched his fist in excitement: "It's indeed Jialoba City! This is indeed Shambala!" His speculation was confirmed.

Qi Yun wasn't overly excited and merely patted Brother Quan's arm: "Thanks for your hard work, go rest now."

Brother Quan nodded, glanced at De Gaulle and his group, and headed toward the camp.

Qi Yun also turned to De Gaulle, who was removing his diving suit: "Since the result is confirmed, let's leave tomorrow."

De Gaulle paused his movements, and after a few seconds of silence, slowly nodded: "Alright."

Qi Yun said nothing further and led Xiao Wu and the others back to the camp.

Upon returning to his tent and lying down, Qi Yun involuntarily recalled the process of searching through map clues, from Lop Nur to Genghis Khan's Tomb, to Kunlun Mountain.

Although the secret of immortality was ultimately a chase born from misunderstanding, at least the mystery was solved, and they reached the legendary Shambala...

"Boss!"

At this moment, Brother Quan's low voice suddenly came from outside the tent.

Qi Yun came back to his senses: "Come in."

Brother Quan lifted the tent flap and entered, holding something in his hand.

"Why aren't you resting? Is there something?" Qi Yun asked, turning on the light.

"Yes." Brother Quan opened his hand and handed over a stone. "I found this at the city under the lake. At that time, this stone was placed on a stone pillar outside the city wall. I saw it seemed to be glowing blue, and thought it was quite unusual, so I brought it out."

"Hmm?" Qi Yun looked surprised, reaching out to take the stone.

The stone was round and about the size of a ping-pong ball, but it was much lighter than it looked, possibly less than one hundred grams.

"What is this thing?" Qi Yun examined it closely under the tent's emergency light, noticing its exterior was richly colored, interwoven with pale yellow, brown, and black-grey patterns.

The material seemed somewhat like... jade?

It felt very smooth to the touch, and there were no signs of artificial polishing on its surface.

Beyond that, nothing else seemed unusual.

Brother Quan shook his head: "I don't know if this thing is useful either."

Qi Yun stared at it for a moment, then looked up and said: "Alright, go rest. Later, I'll have the professor take a look to see if he can identify it."

"Okay." Brother Quan replied, turned, and left the tent.

Qi Yun didn't dwell on it, placed the stone on a nearby small stool, turned off the light, and went to sleep.

...

In the morning, the group packed up their equipment, cleaned up all their trash, and began to head back along the path they came.

Chapter 600: An Ordinary Stone (Double Length) (Part 2)

Although the scenery in this area remained as breathtaking as ever, the group no longer felt the excitement they did when they first arrived.

Especially De Gaulle, who hadn't said much from the beginning, and nobody knew what he was thinking.

Qi Yun walked at the back, continually observing the primitive forest ahead of him.

The breeze blew gently, causing the treetops to sway slightly, as if silently bidding farewell; perhaps this would be the last time humans set foot here.

Suddenly, Xiao Wu, who was walking beside him, stopped and abruptly turned around to look back, his expression tense.

Qi Yun noticed his unusual behavior and stopped to ask, "Xiao Wu, what's wrong?"

Xiao Wu stared at the jungle behind them for a few seconds, then shook his head: "I have a feeling something has been watching us this whole way, yet I found no trace."

"Maybe I'm just mistaken..."

Qi Yun frowned; he knew that someone like Xiao Wu, who practiced internal martial arts, had senses far sharper than average people.

"Brother Quan, did you sense anything?"

Upon hearing the question, Brother Quan stopped and looked back at the jungle behind them, frowning as well: "No."

"Perhaps you guys should go ahead; I'll stay back and observe for a while."

Qi Yun thought for a moment, then slowly shook his head: "No need. Even if some animal is watching us, as long as it doesn't attack, we shouldn't bother with it."

"Just stay alert."

Seeing Qi Yun make a decision, Brother Quan didn't insist any further, lowered his pace, and walked behind Qi Yun, while unlocking the safety on his handgun.

After traveling through the forest for several hours, the group finally arrived at the entrance of the cave they had come through at around noon.

The vines at the cave entrance were still in the same position as when they were pushed aside before, with sunlight slanting in, revealing shallow footprints on the ground. There were no other unfamiliar traces.

Everyone entered the passage and took out glow sticks for lighting.

Xiao Wu, who was at the back, looked back again, his brows knitted together.

As soon as they entered the passage, the air grew stuffy.

The mysterious energy field seemed to take effect again; all electronic devices failed, and even their bodies felt slightly uncomfortable.

The group pressed on, though they didn't know how long they walked, taking several breaks along the way, until they finally arrived at the spot where the German soldier's remains lay.

Qi Yun considered burying the remains for a proper resting place but decided against it, preferring not to disturb the original state here.

After rounding a corner, a ray of sunlight streamed in from the blown-open gap, ushering them back to the outside world.

Outside the passage, Chen Wei, Niu Da, An Zai, and the two guides were camped at the exit. Seeing Qi Yun emerge, they finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"Boss!" An Zai rushed forward, taking the equipment from Qi Yun.

Qi Yun nodded and immediately looked up at the sun in the sky, which was slanting westward.

He then raised his watch, where the dial's hands pointed to the five o'clock position.

Five o'clock!

They had entered the passage at two o'clock!

Time had not vanished.

Unlike the other day.

Why did this change occur...

"Director Qi, it's getting late; should we descend now, or wait until tomorrow?" Guide Losang approached and asked.

Qi Yun glanced around at the snow and wind, then replied, "Let's descend."

This place was over four thousand meters above sea level, making it quite uncomfortable for someone like Ignacio, and the cold was considerable. Even with tents and sleeping bags, it would be tough to endure.

"Alright, alright, we'll pack up and start soon," Losang agreed and went to pack up the tent.

Qi Yun called An Zai aside and whispered instructions, "Later, we'll leave with Losang, and you stay here with the other guide..."

...

Past ten o'clock at night, the group returned to the herders' home, where the Mongolian yurt's stove drove away the outside chill.

After a hot meal, the group, tired from the day's exertions, each went to rest.

Qi Yun and Chen Wei shared a large heated platform, and after getting under the covers, Qi Yun asked Chen Wei, "Brother Wei, what time was it when you exited the passage the other day?"

"Around noon; I didn't pay attention to the exact time."

"An Zai, how about you guys?"

"Around four in the afternoon."

Four o'clock... An Zai and Niu Da had also started in the morning the previous day, and their pace was a bit faster, coming out an hour ahead, which aligned closely with the timing.

What's going on here...

As the sounds of snoring grew around, Qi Yun also gradually fell into a deep sleep...

The next day, Qi Yun called the two guides over for a private talk.

He took out the prepared documents and placed them in front of the two, speaking sternly, "Do you recognize this?"

The two guides leaned in for a look, and their expressions became tense.

Losang swallowed nervously and tentatively asked, "Director Qi, we haven't done anything illegal."

"Don't be nervous; I'm just showing you my identity." Qi Yun withdrew the documents, lightly tapping the table with his fingers, "And to remind you that what I'm about to say is very important, and you must always remember it."

The two guides exchanged a glance and nodded repeatedly, "Yes, yes, Director Qi, go ahead; we'll definitely keep it in mind."

Qi Yun's gaze swept over the two men's faces, and he said in a low voice, "First, about taking us up the mountain and the entrance of that cave, you must take it to your graves."

"You must never reveal a word, whether to your family, friends, or anyone else who inquires in the future."

"Second, if you find out that anyone wants to go to that mountain in the future, you must notify me immediately. I will leave you my contact information later."

The two quickly agreed, "Yes, Director Qi and the country can rest assured, we won't say anything about it!"

"Yes, yes, if someone goes up there, we'll report to you first."

"Good." Qi Yun nodded in satisfaction, "Is there any other route besides the one we took to reach that mountain?"

"There's only this route!" Losang replied firmly, "The climate in this part of Kunlun Mountain is cold, and ice covers everything; there's no way to bypass it unlike other places."

"To reach the mountain, you have to pass through that canyon and go this way."

With this definitive answer, Qi Yun had a clear understanding.

He turned and took a bundle of cash from his bag, placing it on the table: "Here's a hundred thousand yuan as compensation for your efforts this time and the subsequent reward."

"When you speak to this herder in a moment, tell them that if they see strangers heading into the mountains, they should inform you."

Upon seeing the money on the table, Losang and the other guide's eyes lit up momentarily, but they quickly restrained their expressions, repeatedly shaking their heads, "Director Qi, that's too much; we're just leading the way, we don't need so much..."

Despite their words, their eyes seemed fixed on the cash.

"Take it, no need to decline." Qi Yun pushed the money toward them, his tone softening a bit, "Remember what I've told you; this is the task entrusted to you by the country, and you must commit it to memory."

The two exchanged another glance, their faces brightening with barely contained joy, then clumsily stood upright, solemnly promising, "Understood! Please rest assured, Director Guo!"

"Alright, thank you for your help this time, you may go." Qi Yun waved, indicating for them to leave.

After handling this matter, the group set off for Yutian.

However, An Zai was arranged to stay temporarily at the herders' home and would return later.

By nightfall, the convoy arrived at Yutian Airport, where the group parted ways.

Before leaving, Qi Yun had a conversation with De Gaulle, hoping the latter could keep the location of Shambala's entrance a secret, explaining the reasons.

De Gaulle paused in silence before ultimately agreeing to the request: "Alright, I will warn them not to reveal it; I won't mention the exact location to my family either."

"You know my family has always pursued only that secret, and such sites are not what they're interested in."

Upon hearing this, Qi Yun breathed a sigh of relief internally, although he still didn't feel entirely secure.

Even though his contingency plan wasn't necessary this time, who knew if it was because "eternal life" wasn't what De Gaulle expected.

Since there was no conflict of interest, nothing drastic had happened.

Regardless, when dealing with people backed by powerful forces, Qi Yun always maintained a necessary level of vigilance.