

Middle Age 661

Chapter 661: The Tusi Treasure and the First Man Beyond the Pass

Shanghai, inside a certain compound.

A woman in her forties was pacing back and forth anxiously in the room, her lips tightly clenched, tears welling in her eyes.

"That child, I warned him about the dangers back then, told him not to go, but he just wouldn't listen."

"If something truly happens, how am I supposed to live?!"

On the sofa, Ji Hongwei's face was tense. Having worn the uniform for many years, he had long developed a calm demeanor, even if something happened to his own son, he remained composed.

"What's the use of crying here? Do you think crying will bring him back?"

"People have already been sent to search in the Oil Country, just wait for the news peacefully."

Ji's mother wiped her tears, standing there in a daze.

She knew panicking wouldn't help at this point, but thinking about the situation her son could be facing made her heart feel like it was gripped by an invisible hand.

"Ring ring ring~" The phone rang.

Ji Hongwei glanced at the caller ID and quickly pressed the answer button.

"Hello, Brother."

The call was from Ji Hongzhang, who had recently gone to J Province, "I know everything now, don't be anxious, and definitely don't make any rash moves."

"Mm, I understand." Ji Hongwei knew exactly what his brother's reminder meant.

Hua Country has a fleet stationed nearby in Aden Bay, and Ji Hongzhang was worried that in a moment of urgency, he might move those forces to rescue his son without permission.

"As long as you know what's happening." Ji Hongzhang was slightly relieved, paused, and then said, "By the way, I heard Qi Yun went to Shanghai, you might want to meet him."

"It's said he's very closely associated with someone from the Oil Country, any news can be relayed to you promptly."

Ji Hongwei thought for a moment and nodded, "Alright, I'll contact him right away."

...

On the other side, after communicating with Salaman, Qi Yun got up and washed his face, then began receiving today's intelligence while having breakfast.

"Hopefully something useful comes in..."

[Current Intelligence Points: 28]

[Today's Intelligence 1 (Blue): Super typhoon "Phoenix" sweeps through the Philippines, blowing a giant South Sea pearl onto the beach in Zamboanga City. This pearl is valued at over 2 million USD, but currently remains unclaimed. The exact coordinates are ****]

Qi Yun shook his head, not that he despised the 2 million USD, but he had no intention to mess with that right now.

[Today's Intelligence 2 (Red): Last night in Oil Country's Hadhramaut province, a group of WZ elements hijacked a passing convoy on the desert highway. The WZ elements hijacked over a dozen cargo trucks and several escort personnel and drivers. This group of WZ elements has now fled to near Halad Town, with coordinates ****]

Hadhramaut province!

Earlier, Salaman mentioned the missing convoy was around that area, and all other circumstances seemed to match; it's likely the equipment convoy.

Qi Yun immediately picked up his phone and searched for the coordinates on the map, finding it located northeast of Halad Town, right along the border between Oil Country and Yemen.

Currently, Yemen has over a dozen WZ factions, and it's fair to say the civil war is ongoing, with heads being bashed to pulp.

Larger factions include the Yemeni government forces, Houthis, Southern Transitional Council, among others, each occupying their own territory and disregarding each other.

According to the intelligence, Halad Town is currently within the range controlled by a faction supported by the government forces, but it's close to Houthi territory too.

The two groups frequently clash here, with artillery shells flying everywhere, making Halad Town long devoid of residents, transformed entirely into a battlefield between the two sides.

"Damn it, how did they end up there!"

Qi Yun furrowed his brow, worried that Ji Kai might be unlucky enough to get hit by artillery.

Though he hasn't known this guy for long, they clicked well (mainly because Ji Kai was accommodating), and in the past two times, he sided with Qi Yun and helped a lot. Of course, he hoped Ji Kai wouldn't encounter trouble.

Time was of the essence; now that there was information, he must quickly notify Salaman's side to dispatch a rescue team immediately.

Qi Yun opened the call records and dialed Salaman's number again.

"Listen, a friend in the Yemeni government forces just told me some news. Indeed, a group of WZ elements hijacked a Hua Country convoy on the desert highway in Hadhramaut province last night."

"My friend mentioned there are Hua Country people in the convoy, so he relayed the information to me. This group has now fled near Halad Town, I'll send you the specific location later, please ensure their safe rescue!"

Lives were at stake, Qi Yun couldn't take time to think and quickly made up an excuse.

"Halad Town!? That's within the government forces' range! I thought it was another rogue group, didn't expect it to be those guys!" Salaman's tone carried anger.

To prevent detection by the Americans, he couldn't ostentatiously dispatch a force to escort because it was just some photovoltaic equipment and not strategic materials, nothing to do with the military, so he secretly arranged for a small team to support.

Unexpectedly, an incident still occurred...

"Rest assured, since we know their location, I'm sending troops for rescue right now!"

Ending the call, Qi Yun took a deep breath, praying sincerely for the success of the rescue operation...

[Today's Intelligence 3 (Purple 2/2): The other eyeball of Can Cong was once acquired by the "Ailao Tusi" Li Yufang during the Qianlong era, and later buried alongside countless treasures by the last chieftain Li Runzhi at Ailao Mountain;

Chapter 662: The Tusi Treasure and the "First Man Beyond the Pass" (2)

Currently, the only person who knows the location of the buried treasure is the tomb raider Yao Yuzhong.

Upon seeing this piece of intelligence, Qi Yun's nerves, which had just relaxed, instantly tightened again. Another clue had finally emerged!

The eye of Can Cong, the treasure of Ailao Mountain, the tomb raider Yao Yuzhong... The information is quite overwhelming.

Regarding the treasure of Ailao Mountain, Qi Yun had also come across relevant records online, closely tied to the last chieftain Li Runzhi.

In ancient times, the chieftain's position was roughly equivalent to a sixth or seventh rank, primarily responsible for local administration, military, and judicial affairs, akin to a governor or county magistrate.

In essence, it was no different from a local emperor, and was hereditary without fail.

According to folk tales, from the first generation chieftain, the Li Family accumulated vast wealth, reaching its peak under Li Runzhi's tenure.

Some even say he monopolized Yunnan's most lucrative trades at the time—salt, tea, and opium—while secretly hoarding a large amount of official silver and artifacts, worth as much as half a province's treasury, with gold and silver treasures too numerous to count.

This is evident from his family's enormous mansion spanning 4.2 acres, comprising over 60 rooms including gardens and stables.

Strangely, however, on the eve of liberation, after Li Runzhi was executed, his enormous hoarded treasure vanished into thin air.

For decades, rumors have circulated among the populace, some saying it's hidden in the caves of Ailao Mountain, others claiming it's buried in the secret chambers beneath the chieftain's manor, yet no concrete evidence has ever been found.

Even the ancestral tombs of the Li Family have been visited countless times by tomb raiders.

Who would've thought it was actually hidden in Ailao Mountain...

As for the tomb raider Yao Yuzhong mentioned in the intelligence, he was even more familiar, with even an outsider like Qi Yun having heard his title "First Man Beyond the Pass."

This person can be considered the archetype of a "Hu Bayi" character, relying on inherited skills of mountain survey and dragon-seeking, as well as tomb-raiding techniques, to plunder over a hundred ancient tombs over decades, never having failed once.

Regular tomb raiders are already doing well if they can locate a tomb.

But this First Man Beyond the Pass can not only pinpoint locations accurately but can also deduce the approximate identity of the tomb owner through the surrounding feng shui and geography, almost akin to the tomb raiding scenes in television dramas.

Before the founding of the country, it was hard to evaluate, but after the country's establishment, this person was definitely considered the leader in tomb raiding.

However, he was later caught when the matter was exposed and was handed a death sentence with a reprieve, currently still imprisoned in the northern prison.

Rumor has it that before being imprisoned, he had already hidden many of the precious artifacts he stole in secretive places, leaving behind many clues about ancient tombs and treasures, but no one has been able to decipher them.

Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why he wasn't given the death penalty...

"Even the chieftain's treasure in Ailao Mountain was found by this guy, truly the grandmaster in the tomb raiding world," Qi Yun sighed, deciding to finish his current tasks and then visit the First Man Beyond the Pass in prison.

Quickly finishing his breakfast, Qi Yun changed into a black suit, preparing to head to Skyline Group.

Today was his first day at work, and Yu Wanhe had arranged a group meeting to officially announce his appointment in front of everyone in the company.

After adjusting his tie in the mirror, Qi Yun picked up his briefcase and was just about to head out when there was a knock at the door.

Opening the door, Qi Yun saw Xiao Wu standing outside, with a young man behind him.

"Boss, this person is looking for you, says he's a family member of Ji Kai."

Qi Yun looked toward the young man, who appeared to be in his late twenties, sporting a crew cut and standing in a squared posture.

"Hello, Mr. Qi!"

"Hmm." Qi Yun nodded at him, "Do you have any business with me?"

"Our chief is waiting in the parking lot downstairs and would like to meet with you."

Chief?

After a moment's thought, Qi Yun immediately understood who the chief was: "Alright, let's go."

In the parking lot was an Audi A6 with special license plates. Upon approaching, Qi Yun indicated for Xiao Wu and the others to wait, and he opened the car door and got in himself.

The person waiting to meet Qi Yun was Ji Hongwei.

Without needing an introduction, just from appearance, Qi Yun could tell he bore some resemblance to Ji Kai, so he greeted proactively: "Hello, Uncle Ji."

Ji Hongwei wore casual attire today, and since their meeting wasn't formal, Qi Yun's greeting as Uncle Ji was quite tactful.

Ji Hongwei's previously tense expression relaxed slightly, nodding at Qi Yun: "Hello, Xiao Qi."

"I won't beat around the bush; are you aware that the convoy transporting photovoltaic equipment has lost contact in Zhongdong?"

Qi Yun could guess that this was the reason for his visit. If it weren't for something happening to Ji Kai, given Ji Hongwei's position, he wouldn't have personally come to wait and meet him.

Even if a meeting was needed, he should have summoned Qi Yun instead.

"Wendong's leader called me earlier, already informing me of the situation there."

Qi Yun concisely relayed the latest developments to Ji Hongwei, finally adding, "Before coming downstairs, I just communicated with Saudi Arabia's Salaman, who has dispatched the most reliable team for the rescue."

"I believe everyone we've sent over will be alright."

Upon hearing this, Ji Hongwei's furrowed brows finally relaxed, and the anxiety in his eyes diminished somewhat.

He sighed, sincerely saying, "Alright, Xiao Qi, thank you!"

The worst-case scenario hadn't occurred. Now that Qi Yun had personally contacted Salaman and provided a clear rescue plan, his heart finally settled a bit.

Qi Yun shook his head at him: "Uncle Ji, no need to be formal with me. This is what I should do."

"Once we receive any updates from that side, I'll inform you immediately."

Ji Hongwei nodded slightly, pulling out a business card from his pocket and handing it over: "This is my private number, available 24/7."

"Whether good news or bad, please inform me right away, so I have a grasp of the situation."

Qi Yun accepted the card and kept it: "Rest assured, Uncle Ji, everything will be fine. I'll call you with any news."

"Hmm, then I won't keep you any longer."

"Alright, goodbye." After bidding farewell, Qi Yun got out of the car, during which neither of them mentioned Ji Kai's name once.

...

North of Hilade Town, within a military base two hundred kilometers away, over a dozen helicopters were ascending, while soldiers inside were fully armed, ready for battle.

They all belonged to the Saudi Royal Army, the most elite special unit of the Oil Country.

Before Salaman took over, relations between the Oil Country and Husai were hostile, and this unit had been deployed multiple times to border areas for missions.

Apart from the helicopters, four drones also took off, with air-to-ground missiles mounted on their fuselage, heading toward Hilade Town.

In the Riyadh residence, after listening to a subordinate's report, Salaman immediately instructed: "Contact Husai's people right away, have them launch an attack on the government forces in Hilade Town! I want to hear some noise within ten minutes!"

A soldier is prepared for a thousand days, and today was the day Husai repaid his investment.

His close aide quickly took out a phone, dialed a number, and said a few sentences to the other end, his expression extremely serious.

After hanging up, the aide reported to Salaman: "Their people will start the action within ten minutes."

Salaman didn't respond further, clasping his hands behind his back as he walked to the window.

He wondered whether the convoy was intercepted by the local forces by chance or if someone leaked the plan, and they ambushed in advance.

Upon further reflection, this matter did carry an air of oddity.

After all, the convoy was perceived externally as merely transporting photovoltaic equipment, which, though valuable, is not something typically targeted for robbery.

Could it be... the Beidou satellite issue got detected by the Americans?

That would explain why they might direct the local forces to rob in the desert no-man's land?

The CIA people are known for being all-pervasive, and even though Salaman considered himself discreet and cautious, he couldn't entirely dismiss this possibility...

While he was pondering, the southern operation had already commenced...

Chapter 663: Who Is the Rooster!

Above the north of Hairade Town, over a dozen helicopters soared like black giants, skimming low over the dunes.

Inside one of the helicopters, special ops team commander Abdul was reviewing the real-time footage transmitted by the drone.

"All units, attention, arriving at the designated location in five minutes, helicopters to descend to fifty meters for rope descent."

"Drones responsible for clearing adjacent firepower units..."

As a series of tactical instructions were issued, members of the special ops team began their final checks.

At the same time, a pickup convoy was rapidly approaching from the west of Hairade Town, with Brother Heizi's men standing in the truck beds, clad in mismatched camouflage and wearing black masks, revealing only their fierce eyes.

This convoy was the vanguard dispatched by Hu Sai, their most elite team on this side of Hairade Town, each pickup equipped with machine guns and RPGs for heavy firepower.

With a single command from their financier, Salaman, they charged into the meat grinder without hesitation.

"Whoosh whoosh whoosh!"

As the convoy was six or seven hundred meters away from the Z Mansion Army's defense line, several round, seventy to eighty-centimeter-high unknown objects shot from behind, trailing white flames, crashing straight into the abandoned buildings ahead.

"Boom! Boom! Boom!"

A series of explosions sounded, the walls of the four-story main building ahead instantly collapsed, rubble splattering everywhere, causing the ground to tremble.

Immediately, dozens of machine guns fired simultaneously, "rat-a-tat-tat!" Bullets rained down like dense raindrops, pouring towards the perimeter buildings.

No cautious probing, no tactics, just charging in blindly!

The primary objective of this convoy was not to inflict substantial damage on the enemy, but to create as much commotion as possible, drawing the Z Mansion Army towards Hairade Town to allow the Oil Country's special ops team to execute the rescue mission.

"These lunatics!"

In the Z Mansion Army's position, a commander cursed as he watched the pickup convoy charging in:
"The rebels are here! Everyone counter-attack! Hold the line and don't let them break through!"

Upon receiving the order, the Z Mansion Army's machine guns and rifles opened fire simultaneously, forming a dense web of fire.

The leading pickups were instantly hit, billowing thick black smoke, and then exploded into flames.

But the rest of the convoy didn't stop, maneuvering around the burning wreckage to continue their charge.

Meanwhile, as the battle raged on this side, the Oil Country's special ops team also reached the coordinates' vicinity from above.

"GOGOGO!"

With Abdul's command, the helicopter doors swung open, and the special ops members descended quickly along the ropes like agile leopards.

The descent posture alone indicated the team's decent quality, far superior to Brother Heizi's squad, at least no deadly falls.

"Bang bang bang!"

Just as the descent began, a group of turban-wrapped figures fired wildly at the helicopters from afar, bullets clinking off the armored fuselage.

"Drone suppress! Clear the shooting points!" Abdul roared into the communicator.

The airborne drone immediately locked onto targets, its onboard machine guns opened fire, bullets pouring down like a torrential storm, mowing down a swath of WZ elements, the remaining ones scattering in fear.

"Continue rope descent! Quick!"

Taking advantage of this opportunity, the remaining team members quickly descended, then immediately formed into groups of three in a triangular tactical formation, advanced under cover, pushing towards the surroundings.

"Search for the target immediately! Directly shoot upon resistance!"

Everywhere were adobe houses, most structures still intact, suggesting this area hadn't been much affected by warfare yet.

Not far east lay a large open space used as a parking lot, with over a dozen trucks transporting photovoltaic equipment parked there.

Abdul personally led a group in this direction.

Ordinary WZ elements were hardly a match for them, whether in individual quality or weaponry, being overwhelmingly crushed.

Those who resisted either fell on the spot or fled in panic, none able to halt this elite squad's progress.

Upon reaching the trucks, Abdul signaled to leave a few to inspect the vehicles, then continued with the rest towards the residences on the left.

In a dim house, Ji Kai crouched in the corner holding his head, startled by the sudden gunfire and explosions.

Although born into a civilian family and having handled firearms before, shooting in a range and this situation were entirely different.

The explosion sounds nearby were terrifyingly intense, and he felt fortunate not to wet himself from fright...

The old walls were shedding dust, appearing ready to collapse at any moment.

Besides Ji Kai, there were over twenty similar-skinned compatriots inside, all under the watch of several rifle-wielding Brother Heizi's men not far away.

"Old Wang... Old Wang, do you think someone is here to save us?" Ji Kai whispered to a nearby person.

That person shook his head, glanced at the Brother Heizi crew: "Could be, or might not be, hard to say. This place frequently sees skirmishes, might have erupted with other forces."

Ji Kai felt a bit disheartened, his eyes darted around and he suggested: "Hey, while they're focused outside, why don't you seize the chance and take them down?"

Old Wang frowned at this: "Better not risk it, I can handle these few, but they have hundreds more. Even if we take them down, we won't get out."

Chapter 664: Who Is Ji Kai! (Part 2)

"If they get enraged, it could lead to even worse consequences."

He paused and continued, "Since these guys have taken us back, they probably won't do anything to us for the time being, we are temporarily safe."

"Besides, the family must have already noticed that we are missing. Just patiently wait for rescue; there's no need to take risks."

Ji Kai thought it over and felt that the other party made sense, so he didn't speak further.

Just then, a fierce gunfight erupted outside, the sound of rifle fire incessantly ringing.

Old Wang quickly instructed everyone to bury their heads to avoid being hit by stray bullets.

"Rat-a-tat!"

The sounds of gunfire outside drew closer, accompanied by screams echoing, and the faces of several Brother Heizi inside showed panic, realizing something was amiss.

A few exchanged glances, then each made their way toward the door, disregarding the hostages inside.

"Bang bang bang!"

As they barely poked their heads out, they were caught off guard by bullets coming from somewhere.

With two muffled thuds, the two leading Brother Heizi fell, while the remaining one hurriedly retreated inside.

Swift footsteps followed as the dilapidated wooden door was kicked open, and several members wearing desert camouflage stormed in with rifles, led by Abdou.

The only remaining WZ member immediately dropped his AK, squatted down, and surrendered.

Abdou scanned the dimly lit room, spotted Ji Kai and others squatting in the corner, and called out with an odd accent, "Who's Ji Kai?"

The bemused Ji Kai blinked, seemingly hearing his name being called.

However, he didn't hurry to stand up, uncertain of these individuals' intentions and choosing to wait and see.

At this moment, Old Wang recognized these special forces' uniforms, showing a hint of joy in his eyes, and nudged the playing-dead Ji Kai: "They're from the Oil Country, probably here to rescue us!"

"Huh? Oh, oh, I'm Ji Kai!" Realizing, Ji Kai quickly stood up and raised his hand, "I'm Ji Kai!"

Upon hearing, Abdou took a phone from his pocket, glanced at the photo on the screen, and looked at Ji Kai to confirm his identity, then waved to his subordinates.

One quickly stepped forward, removed his own bulletproof vest, and put it on Ji Kai.

Abdou raised his gun and immediately eliminated the WZ member, then announced to everyone, "We're personnel from the Oil Country, here to rescue you all, please follow us."

Upon hearing his declaration, the hostages inside erupted in long-suppressed joy.

"They're here to rescue us!"

"Hell yeah, we're saved, we're saved!"

"Quick! Follow us, hurry up! It's dangerous here!" Abdou gestured, and the team immediately formed a protective formation, keeping the hostages in the center and swiftly moving outside.

The sounds of gunfire continued to echo outside, with WZ forces starting to reinforce and engaging in fierce street fighting with the special forces between the adobe houses.

The "rat-a-tat" of gunfire sounded in succession, and the already shabby residential houses were riddled with holes.

After Ji Kai and others were safely escorted onto the helicopter, Abdou signaled, and five helicopters quickly flew away.

"Have you found our men?!" Abdou shouted into the communicator while observing the drone footage.

The hostages rescued from inside were all from Hua Country, and the Oil Country had assigned a support team of over thirty people who had not yet been found.

"Report! A prisoner was captured who said... the support team was all executed... bodies buried in the pit on the west side," a team member's somber report came through the communicator.

Abdou's face instantly sank, eyes burning with rage.

"These bastards... an immediate team goes to confirm!"

"Yes!"

The fighting continued, and on the west side, Brother Kettle was also intensely fighting, throwing countless gas cylinders into the Z Mansion Army's area, with explosions occurring one after another.

This thing not only packed a punch, but the cost is far cheaper than regular heavy artillery; a single shell's cost is enough to buy a truckload of gas cylinders.

Brother Kettle was already tight on budget, making this homemade heavy weapon all the more suitable.

A few minutes later, Abdou's earpiece echoed with a choked voice: "Reporting to the commander, confirmed to be the support team... all sacrificed."

Abdou suddenly closed his eyes, fury almost bursting from his chest.

He took a deep breath and quickly reported the situation to his superiors.

Inside Riyadh's mansion, when Salaman heard the news, his face turned extremely grim.

Normally, even if given a hundred guts, those WZ forces wouldn't dare do such a thing.

The only possibility is that someone is pulling strings from behind...

This also corroborates some of his previous suspicions.

"Do they really think I'm weak and easy to bully..."

Salaman's eyes flashed coldly, picking up the phone on the table, and when the other side answered, he coldly uttered a sentence: "Order the troops to deploy immediately, advance a hundred kilometers south across the border, eliminate any resisting units!"

"Make sure to completely sweep out every WZ member you encounter!"

The officer on the other end dared not hesitate and immediately responded, "Understood, Your Highness!"

In the southern Oil Country military base, fighter jets roared into the sky, and ground forces composed of tanks and armored vehicles charged forth like a steel flood, crossing the border in a rush toward Helad Town.

This Crown Prince, who always appeared mild-mannered and humble, revealed his iron-clad measures for the first time.

Perhaps the world had forgotten how he ascended to this position.

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Shanghai, Skyline Group headquarters.

The large conference room was filled with people; besides over a thousand employees of the group company, Chairman Yu Wanhe had invited many media outlets.

On the podium, facing such a big setup, Qi Yun internally smiled bitterly.

He originally thought Yu Wanhe's announcement of the appointment was for some mid-to-high-level meeting, but it turned out to be even more extravagant than a Xiaomi press conference, catching him somewhat off guard.

Yet Qi Ting had weathered significant storms; facing a thousand pairs of eyes and countless camera flashes below, he remained poised.

"I'm very happy to meet everyone here today, and honored to join Skyline Group, to fight alongside you all in the future..."

"Thank you **, thank you **, thank you..."

With so many media present, today would certainly make the news. Although Qi Yun disliked these official speeches, he still had to follow protocol...

After he finished speaking, Yu Wanhe took the microphone and babbled on for an hour, a nomination meeting that felt exceedingly dull to Qi Yun finally ended.

Zhou Fangchun, overseeing logistics, prepared a very spacious office for him, right beside Yu Wanhe's office on the top floor.

The space was at least over a hundred square meters, with floor-to-ceiling windows offering a view of Shanghai's bustling skyline. The desk was a solid piece of ebony wood, accompanied by a rest area, tea station, and private bathroom, so luxurious that Qi Yun felt a bit uncomfortable.

"President Qi, are you satisfied with the office? If you have any other requirements, feel free to let me know."

Qi Yun casually nodded: "Quite satisfied, Minister Zhou had put in effort, thank you."

"You're welcome, President Qi, since you've just arrived, the chairman instructed me to take great care, both in living and work aspects, to ensure you are well attended to." Zhou Fangchun stood across the desk, face full of smiles.

Qi Yun smiled wryly; he truly was here to be treated like royalty.

After sending them off, his female secretary knocked and entered, handing over a folder, "President Qi, here's your schedule for the week, all subsequent meetings and engagements have been arranged."

Qi Yun took the folder and flipped through it casually, full of densely packed meeting arrangements, such as progress seminar and observation learning meetings...he couldn't help but frown.

"Do I need to attend all these meetings?"

He didn't have time to come to the office every day.

The female secretary explained with a smile: "Not all are mandatory; if you find them too frequent, I can immediately streamline less important ones for you."

Qi Yun put down the folder, shaking his head: "No need to streamline, I won't attend any."

"I won't be at the company often in the future; if there's something important, contact me directly by phone."

With that, he took his coat and left the office amidst the secretary's stunned gaze.

Chapter 665: Yao Yuzhong

"Hello, Brother Qi, it's Ji Kai!"

In the car, Qi Yun listened to the voice coming through the phone, letting out a long sigh of relief.

The little brother is still alive.

"Where are you now? Are you safe?"

"Safe! I'm in Riyadh!" Ji Kai's voice was filled with the joy of surviving a disaster.

Finding out the other was in Riyadh, Qi Yun completely relaxed his mind: "That's good, have you contacted your family? Your father personally came to see me this morning."

"I've already contacted them. I'm calling to say thank you. It feels like I've regained my life."

"I heard them say that it was you, Brother Qi, who found a friend to figure out where we were being held. Anyway, thank you very much; I will fight for you in this life!"

Qi Yun shook his head with a smile: "Let's not talk about fighting for this life just yet. That place is likely to become quite chaotic afterward, so you'd better come back quickly. I'll arrange a plane to send you back in a bit."

After hanging up the phone, Qi Yun relaxedly lit a cigarette, feeling a bit sentimental.

If this guy had really had an accident over there, it would definitely be difficult to handle.

Moreover, his relationship with Salaman might suffer as a result.

Because before Ji Kai set off, he had specifically called the counterpart to look after him, not knowing how it turned out like this.

However, since the person was safely rescued, it was a blessing in disguise.

The moment that call ended, another unknown number came in, and Qi Yun saw it was from Shanghai, then pressed the answer button.

"Hello, is this Xiao Qi?" A gentle voice of a middle-aged woman came from the receiver.

"Yes, I'm Qi Yun. And you are..."

"Oh, I'm Xiao Kai's mother."

Upon hearing it was Ji Kai's mother, Qi Yun could roughly guess her intention.

Sure enough, after a round of gratitude, Ji's mother invited him to their house that evening to thank him in person.

Originally, Qi Yun planned to fly to Beijing to meet the "First Man Beyond the Pass," but Ji's mother spoke so earnestly, coupled with Ji's father's distinguished status.

The person, such a big hand, personally invites you, if you refuse, it would be somewhat disrespectful.

So Qi Yun accepted the invitation.

...

A curved moon illuminated the Yellow River surface, the shimmering water rippling softly with the evening breeze.

When Qi Yun arrived at the large courtyard, a young man he had seen in the morning was already waiting at the door.

"Mr. Qi, the landlord asked me to pick you up. Please follow me."

Qi Yun nodded slightly, sitting in the Jeep that the other had driven over.

Ji's family abode was a two-story small building, looking fairly ordinary from the outside.

Several green vines climbed the aging walls, and there were a few old locust trees planted in the yard, whose leaves rustled in the evening breeze, exuding a low-key solid vibe.

Lights were bright inside, Ji Hongwei, dressed casually, was sitting on the sofa making tea, and upon seeing Qi Yun enter, immediately stood up to greet him: "Xiao Qi, you've had a tiring journey, come sit!"

Qi Yun placed the basket of fruits he bought for over two hundred yuan down, and smilingly greeted, "Uncle."

Knowing that Ji Kai was safe, Ji Hongwei's condition was much better than in the morning, losing the imposing, sharp aura he had earlier, now seeming as amiable as a neighborhood elder.

"This must be Xiao Qi!"

Hearing the movement outside, Ji's mother came out of the kitchen holding a tray of washed cherries, her face full of cheerful smiles, "Ah, so young indeed. Truly distinguished-looking!"

"Here, have some fruit first, chat with your uncle for a bit, dinner will be ready soon."

Ji's mother maintained herself well, appearing much younger than Ji's father, speaking with a slight local accent.

"Hehe, thank you, Auntie." Qi Yun thanked with a smile, sitting on the sofa.

Ji Hongwei poured Qi Yun a cup of freshly brewed tea, the aroma lingering: "Try it, my treasured tea leaves, tastes pretty good."

Qi Yun picked up the teacup and took a sip, couldn't tell the difference from the inexpensive tea leaves, but still praised: "Yes! Indeed nice! Uncle is certainly someone who appreciates tea."

Ji Hongwei laughed heartily, patting his thigh, sighed: "Xiao Qi, thank you for your help with the matters over there."

"I have only this one child, if something really happened to him, your Auntie and I would probably regret it for the rest of our lives."

"If you need any help in the future, you can call me directly."

He spoke less cautiously than he did in the morning, frankly expressing his intentions, perhaps because he was at home, now just being a father rather than a leader.

Qi Yun didn't intend to exploit past favors for future gains, but the attitude displayed by the other still satisfied him.

With Ji Hongwei's status, such a promise was worth a fortune.

More importantly, through this incident, the ties between both parties had grown closer, Ji Hongwei and Ji Hongzhang would become his future support.

Qi Yun put down the teacup, sincerely replied: "Uncle, you don't have to say that, Xiao Kai and I are good friends, when he encounters danger, I certainly won't stand by idly."

"Moreover, the Oil Country places considerable importance on the affairs concerning our people; even without my intervention, I believe they also could have turned misfortune into fortune."

Ji Hongwei waved his hand, increasingly appreciating this young man in his heart.

Modest, stable, competent, unsurprising that he gained the favor of those in Beijing.

"By the way, you should know what's happening over there now, right?"

Qi Yun nodded: "Yes, I'm aware of some."

Earlier Salaman had contacted him, mentioning plans to take retaliatory actions down south and also sharing some speculations.

Ji Hongwei took another sip of tea, slowly said: "I don't know whether you usually pay attention to the situation over there, but I wish to remind you that you should best not get entangled in subsequent matters."

Chapter 666: Yao Yuzhong (Part 2)

"Those intelligence agencies are very sharp, try not to get their attention, better safe than sorry; keeping yourself secure is the most important."

This statement, while sounding somewhat ungrateful—people just saved your son, and now you're saying this—feels a bit awkward...

But this is precisely the demonstration of a mature leader.

"Father is right, I understand," Qi Yun nodded in agreement, "I wasn't planning on getting involved again. This rescue was solely for Xiao Kai, and the subsequent matters will be handled by Salaman; I won't appear again."

"It's good that you understand, especially when it involves the battle for interests, you must think thrice before acting."

Ji Hongwei showed a satisfied smile, raising his hand to pat Qi Yun's arm, "You're still young, and your future is boundless."

"Come on, let's have some food."

...

The climate in Dongbei is quite similar to J Province in the north; it's just as dry and cold. Though fall has just begun, there's already a hint of chill in the morning and evening breeze.

Outside the L Province's first prison, the warden was already waiting at the gate and rushed forward to warmly greet Qi Yun as soon as he got out of the car.

"Advisor Qi, hello, hello!"

Qi Yun politely shook hands with the other party: "Warden Wang, thank you; sorry for the trouble."

He contacted the other party in advance using Guo An's special advisor identity, so this form of address was quite fitting.

"What trouble could there be? It's our duty to cooperate with your work. Please come in, please come in!" Warden Wang spoke with a thick regional accent, enthusiastic and hearty, very much in line with the characteristics of Dongbei people.

Qi Yun led Xiao Wu following the other party into the office, where it was heated and the temperature was quite comfortable.

Warden Wang instructed his subordinates to prepare to fetch the person, then invited Qi Yun to sit down and have some tea.

After taking off his coat, Qi Yun sat on the sofa and asked about the First Man Beyond the Pass: "Warden Wang, could you briefly introduce Yao Yuzhong's situation to me?"

"Of course, no problem!" Warden Wang wiped his mouth and leaned back, "This guy is quite the celebrity here; speaking of his story, it's quite long..."

"Back in the tomb-raiding circles, Yao Yuzhong was a legendary figure. He was known as 'Golden Eye' in the industry, never using modern tools, relying solely on ancestral methods: compass for locating, wooden stakes to probe the soil, always accurate..."

A famous name is never without substance. It seems this guy is indeed remarkable; no wonder he managed to discover the Lacquered Elder Tree treasure, which others couldn't find even after cracking their heads.

Qi Yun listened to the other's narration, contemplating internally.

Twenty minutes later, a prison officer came in to report that everything was ready.

"Okay, take Advisor Qi over," Warden Wang stood up and smiled at Qi Yun, "Advisor Qi, just follow him; I have work to attend to, so I won't accompany you."

"Hehe, okay." Qi Yun glanced at the other party, thinking this Warden Wang is quite a character.

The prison officer led Qi Yun through two heavy iron gates, finally pushing open a room at the end of the corridor.

"Advisor Qi, I'll be waiting outside; call if you need anything," the officer said before consciously closing the door and leaving.

Qi Yun's gaze swept around the room; the furnishings were simple, just an iron table, two chairs, and the man shackled in chains.

No recording equipment was found; it's unclear whether it was originally absent or deliberately arranged by the other party.

Qi Yun pulled out a chair and sat down, focusing his gaze on Yao Yuzhong.

The man appeared quite elderly, his frame so thin that he seemed just bones, hair gray, wrinkles etched into his face like carvings.

With this appearance, it's difficult to associate him with the title of "First Man Beyond the Pass."

In contrast, Yao Yuzhong showed no reaction to suddenly being taken out of his cell, staring upwards throughout, as if he'd experienced such situations many times.

"Let me introduce myself; I'm Qi Yun." Qi Yun was the first to break the silence.

Yao Yuzhong seemed not to hear, still looking up, the lean neck revealing blue veins.

Qi Yun wasn't annoyed, chuckling softly as he took out a pack of cigarettes, lighting one, then pushed both the cigarette and lighter towards him, "Fancy one?"

Yao Yuzhong blinked, finally shifting his gaze toward Qi Yun, staring for a few seconds before hoarsely speaking, "You're not one of the officials."

"Oh? How can you tell?" Qi Yun asked curiously.

Yao Yuzhong dragged the chains to pick up a cigarette, lighting it before slowly saying, "They wouldn't disregard protocol like this."

Qi Yun paused, realizing the other was referring to smoking in the interrogation room.

"Hehe." Qi Yun laughed lightly, not refuting, crossed his legs saying, "I'm here today to ask you about something."

"Hoo~" Yao Yuzhong took another deep drag, "In exchange for the cigarette, speak, but I won't guarantee a response."

"Alright," Qi Yun nodded, finding this person quite interesting.

"You should've heard of the Lacquered Elder Tree treasure?"

Lacquered Elder Tree!

At hearing these words, a hint of fluctuation flashed through Yao Yuzhong's eyes as if he was lost in some memories.

The cigarette burned halfway down between his fingers, ash falling onto the cold tabletop.

Yao Yuzhong didn't speak, only his fingers holding the cigarette trembled slightly, his murky eyes swirling with complex emotions: nostalgia, reluctance, and a touch of deep vigilance.

It was only when the cigarette nearly burned his fingers that he snapped back to reality.

Tossing the butt to the ground, he stamped it out, then sighed saying, "Sorry, I don't know why you're asking me about this; I don't know anything about the Lacquered Elder Tree treasure, can't answer you."

Qi Yun had been watching the other's reactions; from those subtle expressions, he could tell the person knew something, and the system intelligence had never been wrong.

But Yao Yuzhong's attitude clearly showed he didn't want to talk.

Before Qi Yun could speak again, Yao Yuzhong stood up, shouting towards the door, "Guard! I'm not feeling well!"

The prison officer outside entered upon hearing, frowning at him.

Yao Yuzhong repeated, "I'm not feeling well, request to return to my cell to rest."

"You..."

The officer was about to scold him when Qi Yun raised his hand, "Let him go back."

Seeing Qi Yun had no objection, the officer swallowed his words, "Alright then, Advisor Qi, please wait a moment; I'll have a colleague take you out."

With that, he stepped forward to unlock Yao Yuzhong's chains, escorting him out.

As Yao Yuzhong passed Qi Yun, he paused, swept his murky gaze over him, saying nothing, leaving only a faint scent of tobacco and the feeling of old age.

After the two left, Qi Yun sighed, setting his eyes on the cigarette butt Yao Yuzhong left behind.

From the brief conversation, he'd gleaned much information.

Initially, Yao Yuzhong's demeanor indicated he'd experienced similar scenarios numerous times, leading to a certain numbness.

Though sentenced and imprisoned, why do people repeatedly seek him out? The answer was clear.

What he held in his mind surpassed countless amounts of gold and jewels.

Additionally, the man possessed sharp observational skills. From the simple act of smoking, he'd deduced Qi Yun wasn't an official; his mind remained agile, far from the aged sluggishness he displayed.

The most crucial was his reaction to "Lacquered Elder Tree," the complex expression indicating deep-rooted memories tied to that place.

"Hoo~ seems another approach is needed..."

As for whether Yao Yuzhong would disclose today's purpose, Qi Yun wasn't overly concerned; his reluctance to talk implied divulging it would bring more trouble.

Just then, another prison officer arrived, guiding Qi Yun back to Warden Wang's office.

"How was it? Did it go smoothly?" Warden Wang asked, coming over.

Qi Yun shook his head, refraining from details, exchanging simple pleasantries, and indicating he might visit again, then took his leave.

Chapter 667: Key Information

Ning County, Province M.

When Qi Yun and his group arrived here, it was already afternoon.

Since the first meeting with Yao Yuzhong didn't go smoothly, Qi Yun decided to take a different approach and investigate his hometown to see if he could find a breakthrough.

Ning County is a small industrial town, with chimneys standing tall and a faint scent of coal smoke lingering in the air. Old factories and newly built residential buildings are interspersed along the streets.

Yao Yuzhong's hometown is in the outskirts, at Yaojiawa. As the car left the city, the road gradually became bumpy.

Qi Yun looked out towards the distant hills, recalling the dossier on Yao Yuzhong in his mind.

His father was once the village's feng shui master. Whether building a house or handling weddings and funerals, everyone relied on Old Yao for choosing auspicious dates.

Calling him a feng shui master was perhaps overstating it, as his skills relied on an old almanac and his smooth-talking, which made him a respected figure in the village.

That old almanac also became the key to Yao Yuzhong entering the tomb raiding business.

As a child, with no entertainment options available and no novels like today, Yao Yuzhong often flipped through his father's almanac, dreaming of becoming a feng shui master someday.

Later, as he grew older, he made a living weaving mats, selling shoes, and doing hard labor at a brick kiln. But with his ambitious nature, Yao Yuzhong was unwilling to let his life slip away like this.

By chance, he met a Tomb Raider from a neighboring village, and thus joined their ranks.

Once in the business, Yao Yuzhong took on menial and exhausting side jobs, receiving the smallest share of money each time—just enough to scrape by while risking his neck.

After nearly two years of this life, his frustration grew until he decided to leave.

Back home, he frequently flipped through his father's almanac, and a new idea took root in his mind.

"Feng shui + tomb raiding, is there any potential?"

Back then, there was no internet, and even having a TV at home was rare, unlike the ease of acquiring knowledge now.

Driven by this idea, Yao Yuzhong went to great lengths to learn professional knowledge at museums and read extensively on feng shui, studying diligently for thirty years. Through practical experience with over two hundred ancient tombs, he ultimately earned his reputation as the First Man Beyond the Pass...

With such determination, he likely could have succeeded in any other field as well...

As the car drove into Yaojiawa, the sun was already setting in the west.

Under the old tree at the village entrance, a few toothless old men were chatting away. Seeing a foreign vehicle approaching, they all cast curious glances.

Qi Yun asked Xiao Wu to stop the car and walked over straightaway.

"Sir, I'm asking about something. Is Yao Yuzhong's house here?"

The old men exchanged glances, their eyes revealing perplexity.

An elderly man with gray hair took the cigarette offered by Qi Yun and slowly said, "You're looking for Yao Yuzhong? Isn't he already inside? What are you here for?"

"We're his old friends, just checking if he has any relatives left here." Qi Yun said, half-truthfully.

Mentioning Yao Yuzhong, the old man sighed, "Such a pity about that lad. Back in the day, Old Yao was so upright, who would've thought his son would stray, profiting from digging up ancestors' graves, and ended up taking a big fall."

"Exactly! I watched him grow up from a kid..."

The group started recalling Yao Yuzhong's past.

That's how villages are; good deeds don't travel far, but bad news does.

The old men, chatting one after another, even brought up childhood tales like Yao Yuzhong stealing chickens from someone's house, filled with an "I always knew he'd go astray" sentiment.

Qi Yun listened with a frown, noticing that as they lit the cigarettes he had given them, they thoroughly ignored him and enjoyed their conversation. Helplessly, he interrupted, "Sir, does anyone still live at his place now?"

"No." The old man shook his head, "Old Yao passed away a year after he was taken away, and his daughter handled the funeral before marrying into the city. She hasn't returned for years."

"His old house is by the brick kiln at the village's east end. You can go see it if you'd like."

Qi Yun thought for a moment and instructed Brother Quan to take a look, then continued asking the elder, "Do you know where his daughter got married?"

The old man scratched his head, recalling, "Seems like she went out of town, said she opened a small restaurant, but what's it called..."

....

Nighttime, a small restaurant by the county town's highway.

Qi Yun stepped out of the car and glanced at the sign, half-covered in dust, and walked inside.

The first floor was empty, with a few tables scattered about, while the cluttered cashier counter had shelves stocked with instant noodles and beer.

"Boss!" After scanning around, Qi Yun shouted.

No response.

"Anyone here?"

"Boss!"

"Coming, coming, who is it?" An impatient voice answered from the stairs, and a middle-aged man with a protruding belly descended from the second floor.

"Ha, we're here to eat." Qi Yun replied while discreetly sizing up the man.

Normally, when a customer enters, as the owner, you might not be overly enthusiastic, but you'd at least greet them.

But this middle-aged man showed no hint of hospitality, his eyelids drooping, as he pointed to a makeshift menu on the wall, "Look for yourself, can't do anything complex, no stews, just quick fries."

Following his gesture, Qi Yun looked over and almost felt like he'd stumbled into a shady joint.

The cheapest shredded potatoes cost 28 RMB per plate!

Stir-fried chili pork is even 40 RMB!

Chapter 668: Key Information (Part 2)

Good grief, with these prices, no wonder there's not a single customer even with the restaurant on the highway.

"Boss, are you sure there isn't a mistake with the prices on this menu?" Qi Yun turned and casually asked.

"That's the price! Take it or leave it! If you don't want to eat, just get out!" The middle-aged man waved dismissively, ready to chase them away, ignoring even the intimidating presence of Brother Quan and his companions.

Who knows where this guy gets his confidence from.

Qi Yun couldn't help but smile, never having seen anyone run a business quite like this.

Inwardly, he thought, today I'm damn determined to try this, let's see what a forty-yuan stir-fried pork tastes like...

"I'll take one of everything in this row on the left." He gestured at the menu.

The middle-aged man was taken aback, as if he hadn't expected Qi Yun to actually order, and the way he ordered was so damn unique.

That little sweep just now would cost two to three hundred bucks according to the menu.

"Wait right there!" The man tossed out the words and turned to walk to the kitchen, dragging his feet, not even glancing back as if it was a chore to exchange even a single word with his customers.

Soon, the sound of chopping vegetables came from the kitchen.

The group sat down at a table by the door, and Brother Quan glanced in the direction of the kitchen and joked, "This guy's got quite the attitude, huh."

Qi Yun just smiled without saying anything, giving a nod to Xiao Wu next to him, who then got up and left.

After waiting for about half an hour, the dishes finally arrived.

The stir-fried potatoes were half-cooked, the stir-fried pork with green peppers had barely any meat and was a bit fishy, and the bowl of rice was cold.

The man plonked the dishes on the table and turned to walk away.

"Boss, wait a sec." Qi Yun called after him.

"What?" The man's eyebrows shot up as if someone owed him millions.

Qi Yun wasn't angered, instead chuckled lightly: "I want to ask you about someone, do you know Yao Fengjuan?"

At the mention of the name Yao Fengjuan, the man immediately became wary: "What do you want!?"

Judging by his reaction, Qi Yun had a rough idea of the man's identity and continued smiling as he explained, "Don't be nervous, we're friends of her father, Yao Yuzhong."

"He asked us to come see Ms. Yao Fengjuan."

The name Yao Yuzhong seemed to touch a nerve, as the man's face immediately darkened, and his eyes were full of caution as he stared at Qi Yun.

"My wife cut ties with him long ago. She doesn't need his concern. You all better leave!"

Qi Yun gave him a deep look without saying much more, the dishes on the table were hard to swallow anyway, so he threw down three bills and left with his companions.

Back in the car, Xiao Wu turned to report, "No one was upstairs, but there was a wedding photo hanging in the living room. I'm not sure if it's her, but I took a picture."

He then handed the phone to Qi Yun and continued, "When he went downstairs just now, he seemed to forget to lock the safe. I saw a lot of cash inside, at least over a million."

Brother Quan chuckled at this: "Wow, this shady business actually makes quite a bit, huh."

"But... for someone running a small business, why have so much cash at home?"

Qi Yun also sensed something unusual. With that guy's business attitude, he'd be lucky to make ends meet, let alone have a hundred grand stashed away. Something's definitely up here...

He looked at the wedding photo on the screen. The woman in the photo bore some resemblance to Yao Yuzhong in her features, so it had to be right.

While they were talking, a Volkswagen CC pulled up in front of the restaurant.

A woman in her thirties, dressed fashionably, stepped out of the car. It was Yao Fengjuan.

Qi Yun glanced sideways, but instead of approaching her directly, he had Brother Quan drive the car to the small shop across the street.

After the shopkeeper happily pocketed a thousand yuan, he told Qi Yun everything he knew about the couple.

Yao Fengjuan's husband, the arrogant guy from earlier, was named Li Dachun. He used to be a waiter at a restaurant in the city and opened the current venue here with Yao Fengjuan shortly after they married.

Being right on the highway, they had good business initially due to passing truck drivers.

But then, for some unknown reason, the couple suddenly raised their menu prices and stopped taking their business seriously. As a result, the number of customers dwindled to nearly none.

Yao Fengjuan usually went to the city to play mahjong, while Li Dachun rarely left the house, preferring to play games at home.

"I saw they had a nice car though. How can they afford it with how they're doing business?" Qi Yun voiced his suspicion.

The shopkeeper peeked over at the CC across the street and explained, "Li Dachun said he's also in on a second-hand car business with someone else. That car should be second-hand as well; he's just the financier. Last time we drank, he bragged about making forty to fifty thousand a month. Who knows if he's full of it."

Qi Yun nodded, pondered for a moment, and asked, "Do you remember when they started raising their prices at this restaurant?"

"Um... let me think..." The shopkeeper wrinkled his brow, hesitated for a few seconds, then uncertainly said, "I think it was three years ago."

Three years ago.

Qi Yun said no more, instructing the shopkeeper to keep this confidential, before leaving the shop.

After he left, the shopkeeper beamed as he counted Qi Yun's money again, not a bit concerned about why he asked these questions.

Back in the car, Qi Yun called the warden to ask if Yao Fengjuan had visited her father in prison, and when the first visit happened.

He got the expected answer.

Yao Yuzhong committed a severe offense and was denied visitation until he was transferred to the first prison in Province L.

It was then that his daughter visited him for the first time, precisely three years ago.

Since then, Yao Fengjuan and her husband's lifestyle seemed to have changed somewhat.

Combining this with the rumors he'd previously heard, Qi Yun guessed that Old Yao had likely told his daughter the location of some hidden treasure.

And from the looks of things, she'd already cashed it in, explaining why her house had over a hundred in cash.

As for Li Dachun and his supposed second-hand car business making forty to fifty thousand a month, it was likely just a front, just like keeping the restaurant open, to disguise their true income source.

It would be easy to verify by having the local authorities check their financial accounts.

Understanding the key points, Qi Yun figured out how to get Yao Yuzhong to talk.

He whipped out his phone and called Old Ghost, directing him to come over and get ready for action, then instructed An Zai to keep an eye on the couple...

....

The next day, Qi Yun was having breakfast at the hotel while receiving intel for the day, hoping to learn more secrets about the couple from the previous day.

[Current intelligence points: 29]

[Today's intelligence 1 (Blue): 78 kilometers west of the city of Ning County, there's an undiscovered small coal mine with reserves exceeding thirty thousand tons]

With current coal prices, this small coal mine should be worth over twenty million.

But it's a complicated affair with all the equipment, permits, and relationships necessary, so Qi Yun hadn't the patience for it now. He planned to have someone manage the paperwork and sell it when he had time.

[Today's intelligence 2 (Green): Yesterday, a herdsman in Bansen Right Banner stumbled upon a peculiar stone while herding. The stone is engraved with patterns from the Red Mountain Era five thousand years ago, and the herdsman plans to turn it over to the government, contact number ****]

Qi Yun chuckled and shook his head, deciding not to intercept the stone. In the past, southeastern Province M was the birthplace of Red Mountain Culture. It's not uncommon for locals to dig up relics from that era while farming. Though these items aren't as valuable as porcelain and other antiques, they hold significant cultural research value.

Yao Yuzhong had illegally excavated multiple Red Mountain cultural sites in his early years, causing substantial damage.

[Today's intelligence 3 (Green): Ten minutes ago, a masked man purchased twenty lottery tickets with the same number at fifty times the stake each in a lottery shop on Construction Road]

Wow~

Twenty tickets at fifty times each, that's a thousand times if he wins. What a massive payout that would be...

Buying the same number a thousand times and wearing a mask adds a touch of mystery...

That's something even Qi Ting wouldn't dare meddle in, too many implications involved.

Chapter 669: Treasure in the Mountains

After breakfast, except for An Zai who stayed behind to continue the surveillance, everyone else returned to L Province first.

In the car on the way back, Qi Yun looked at the materials sent by the Ning County police. As he had deduced, the couple's bank and WeChat accounts had no large deposits over the past few years.

This trip wasn't in vain. Although he didn't directly contact Yao Fengjuan, Qi Yun had already figured out a way to make Yao Yuzhong talk through clues.

....

Returning to the First Prison of L Province, Warden Wang tactfully did not ask many questions. After a brief chat with Qi Yun, he had someone lead him to meet Yao Yuzhong.

The iron door of the interrogation room closed with a clang, and Yao Yuzhong looked the same as always. He sat hunched over, his eyelids drooping, seemingly disinterested in everything.

Qi Yun got straight to the point. After sitting down, he pushed his phone over. On the screen was the wedding photo of Yao Fengjuan and her husband.

"I went to your hometown."

Yao Yuzhong glanced at the screen, his eyelids barely lifting, and although his eyes showed no emotion, his throat moved slightly but he said nothing.

"Your daughter drives a car worth two or three hundred thousand, lives comfortably, and keeps more than a million in cash at home. She's living well."

"But I have a question I'd like you to help me answer." Qi Yun said as he pulled out the materials from his bag and pushed them over. "Where do you think that more than a million came from?"

"There are no transaction records, and no taxes paid. I'm quite curious."

Upon hearing this, Yao Yuzhong's thumb and forefinger involuntarily pinched together on the table; a subconscious sign of nervousness.

Qi Yun keenly caught this detail, further confirming his suspicions.

"You're asking the wrong person."

Yao Yuzhong finally spoke, explaining, "When I was arrested, she wasn't married yet. I haven't seen her in a long time and don't know her current situation."

"Is that so." Qi Yun chuckled softly, staring intently at him with a hint of meaning.

This kind of tomb raider usually has good psychological resilience. Qi Yun had seen it when he helped Shi Feng with a matter in Bird City before.

These people live recklessly, caring little for tomorrow, and are stubborn to the core.

Qi Yun casually lit a cigarette, continuing to pressure him.

He pulled Guo An's badge from his jacket pocket and handed it over: "Even someone with sharp eyes can be misled sometimes. Do you recognize this?"

The moment Yao Yuzhong's eyes landed on the badge, his formerly hunched body instantly froze. Upon seeing the national emblem, for the first time, panic appeared on his aged face.

"Guo... Guo An."

That was a department he'd only heard about in rumors...

"Good that you recognize it." Qi Yun took back the badge, flicked the ash from his cigarette leisurely, and said, "You hid the looted artifacts at a location, and three years ago, when Yao Fengjuan first visited, you told her where."

"Am I wrong?"

Yao Yuzhong lowered his head, his shoulders trembling slightly, lips quivering: "I don't know what you're talking about..."

"Oh~ Old Yao, we're all smart people. Whether you admit it or not makes no difference to me."

"Smuggling artifacts is a serious crime. If I have them brought back for investigation, I'm sure they'll cooperate soon enough, don't you think?"

"Then I could arrange for them to serve time in this prison, and you could all get a bit of fresh air together, right?"

Yao Yuzhong's face turned instantly pale, his mental defense completely broke down, and he slumped in the chair as if all his strength had been drained from him.

He had indeed hidden a lot of treasures outside, thinking he had done it without anyone knowing, but hadn't expected to be found out...

Qi Yun wasn't bluffing. That department didn't need evidence to investigate someone—just suspicion was enough.

After weighing his options internally, Yao Yuzhong finally made a choice, sighed, "What do you want me to do to let them go?"

Seeing him relent, Qi Yun's tone returned to calm as he held up two fingers, "It's simple, two things."

"First, reveal all the locations where you've hidden the artifacts."

"Second, answer the question I asked you last time."

Yao Yuzhong took a deep breath and nodded helplessly: "Fine, I'll cooperate."

Qi Yun took out paper and pen from his bag. After Yao Yuzhong wrote down all the hiding places, he took a photo and sent it to Xiao Hanguang's secretary, Xiao Han, briefly explaining the situation in a text.

"Can I have a cigarette?" Yao Yuzhong asked Qi Yun with a complex expression.

Qi Yun didn't rush him and tossed him a cigarette and lighter, waiting quietly as he smoked.

With trembling hands, Yao Yuzhong lit the cigarette, took a few deep puffs, and finally began his tale, "The Ai Lao Shan treasure you asked about last time, I do know where it is."

"In all my years of traveling, that was probably the most dangerous place I've ever been to. When we went, we were six, and I was the only one who came out alive..."

Amid the swirling smoke, his eyes grew distant as if traveling back to that forest.

"We started into the mountains in the morning and soon encountered miasma. It was indistinguishable from ordinary fog. We didn't pay much attention at first, but within minutes of breathing it, someone in our group got delirious, heading straight off a cliff."

"All of us were affected then. We had brief blindness; we couldn't grab him in time and watched him fall off the cliff."

"Then we realized it was the mist and quickly covered our mouths and noses with wet cloths, barely stabilizing ourselves."

Chapter 670: Mountain Treasure (2)

About the toxic miasma of the mournful old fir, Qi Yun had seen reports about it online. The reason why that area is prohibited from deep exploration is largely due to this stuff; if accidentally inhaled, it can cause hallucinations.

However, that's the scientific explanation. In Yao Yuzhong's time, knowledge wasn't so widespread, and locals even believed that there were goblins in the mountains that ate people.

"This is just the beginning." Yao Yuzhong took a deep drag of his cigarette and continued, "After the miasma dispersed, the paths in the mountain became more treacherous. The towering primeval forest blocked out the sun, and we gradually lost our way, going in circles."

"In the afternoon, it started to rain, the miasma dissipated, and we finally found our way. But who would've thought that the rain intensified, and suddenly there was a flash flood?"

"Mud and water from the mountain rushed down the valleys. We were on a narrow mountain gorge, and one of our guys, being slow to react, couldn't evade and was swept away by a mudslide."

....

"We continued on our way, camping in the forest at night, and then a guy in our team got bitten by a tiny black insect. He immediately had a high fever and convulsions. The medicine we had was useless, and by morning, he was gone."

"Six of us went into the mountain, and within a day, three were dead."

Yao Yuzhong's voice was tinged with melancholy, as if he wasn't sure if he felt sorry for those who died, or if he was still terrified upon reflection.

"On the second day, we followed the river and finally reached the destination—a stretch of mountains extending for dozens of kilometers. Inside the mountain, hidden, was a gigantic cave and a bottomless underground river, flowing out from the unseen depths of the cave."

"And the treasure you mentioned in the mournful old fir is likely hidden deep within that cave."

Qi Yun, upon hearing this, finally asked the question that had been bothering him, "I read your dossier, and it said you're skilled in finding tombs through Feng Shui, but the mournful old fir treasure site isn't a big tomb. How did you determine its location?"

At this point, Yao Yuzhong no longer concealed the truth: "That place is indeed not a tomb, but it's the most suitable place for hiding treasure."

"I was searching for tombs near the mournful old fir, staying with a local farmer, when I happened to hear him mention the treasure. He said a man named Li hired five hundred porters to transport countless treasures into the mountains."

"In the end, only one or two of those porters escaped, and they were out of their minds. It's said the treasures were hidden in a massive cave."

"I spent two years poring over the county records and surveyed the surroundings of the mournful old fir several times before finally determining the cave's location based on the river's flow."

Qi Yun blinked at this—the outcome seemed different from what he imagined.

He thought it would be like in the movies, where they'd use some dragon-seeking divination or star-gazing technique to find the spot.

He never expected it to be so plain and unadorned...

Yao Yuzhong, noticing his expression, seemed to guess his thoughts and felt as if his professional skills were being underestimated, looking displeased: "You think this place is easy to find? How many people have gone into those mountains over the years? Forget finding the treasure; not even two people made it out alive."

"Even modern technology is useless in the mountains since the river courses keep changing. If you don't understand the earth's veins, you'll never find it."

Qi Yun clicked his tongue but didn't refute.

He's been to places like Lop Nur and Kunlun. Such restricted zones are often filled with bizarre magnetic fields, rendering high-tech useless. Plus, the mountains are shrouded year-round in miasma and fog, making it easy to lose one's direction.

"So, did you find the treasure? Did you bring anything back?" Qi Yun asked the question he was most interested in.

Yao Yuzhong shook his head, leaving it uncertain whether he didn't find the treasure or couldn't bring anything out.

He looked down again, his expression growing heavier, as he replied slowly, "That cave is the most dangerous place. The other two members of our team died inside."

"What danger?"

"Snakes!"

"Snakes!?"

"Yes, snakes! More of them than you can imagine!" Yao Yuzhong's Adam's apple bobbed, "When we entered the cave, we only saw a few scattered small snakes. We didn't think much of it; after all, we had already seen many along the way, nothing rare."

"But the deeper we went, the more snakes there were. They were wriggling out from every crevice in the rock walls—brightly colored and all venomous."

"By the light of the torches, their eyes shone eerily, covering the ground, enough to make anyone's scalp tingle."

"Moreover, it seemed as if they were being commanded by something, converging on us from the rock walls and ground from all directions."

Yao Yuzhong's hands trembled slightly, clearly scarred by the memory.

"At first, we could use torches to repel them, but later they were fearless of the flames. They went mad, swarming over us at incredible speed!"

"We turned to flee towards the exit, but it was too late. The swarm had already gathered behind us, blocking us in tightly, leaving no room to step."

"In the end, I desperately jumped into the underground river, narrowly escaping with my life."

Hiss~

Qi Yun shivered uncontrollably; just hearing the story was enough to give him goosebumps all over.

However, he noticed that when Yao Yuzhong recounted the last part, he seemed a bit unnatural. Qi Yun secretly speculated that Yao Yuzhong's escape might not have been as he described...

"And the treasure? Was there a treasure in the cave?"

"I didn't see the treasure, but I did see a lot of skeletons in that cave—many of them. They probably belonged to the porters."

Qi Yun raised an eyebrow. If there were so many skeletons in the cave, there was a good chance it really was the treasure site.

Even though Yao Yuzhong didn't see the treasure firsthand, reports said he was the only person currently knowing its location.

Most likely, it wasn't wrong.

But he still had a nagging question: how did those porters die?

Did they die while carrying the treasure in or while coming out?

If there were so many snakes in the cave, how did they manage to carry the treasure in?

After hearing this, Yao Yuzhong shook his head and sighed, "That's a question I'm puzzled over as well. My guess is that when those porters entered the cave, it was possibly winter or at the lowest temperature point of the mountains, with the snakes in hibernation."

"As for their cause of death... it's likely they were killed by that man Li Yun's orders."

Qi Yun nodded, considering the other person's conjecture fairly reasonable.

Those porters, mostly from nearby villages, knew the way to the mountains. Greedy for the profit and to avoid information leaking, it's impossible they'd let them live.

If one or two managed to escape, something unexpected most likely occurred.

"Alright, I've told you everything I know, and this secret will go to the grave with me. No one else will ever know."

"I hope you can spare the couple." Yao Yuzhong implored with a hint of pleading in his eyes, speaking sincerely.

Qi Yun sighed and smiled wryly, "You make it sound like I'm the villain, when it was you who broke the law."

Still, this guy was quite astute and didn't even need reminding.

"Rest assured, I'm a man of my word."

Having his assurance, Yao Yuzhong finally felt the weight lifted off his shoulders.

Qi Yun took out his phone, opened a map app, and asked, "Can you point out where that cave is?"

Yao Yuzhong hesitated, looking at the phone screen, "It's a bit complicated. The mournful old fir area is all mountains connected to mountains; you have to follow the river to precisely locate that place. Even your satellite map can't capture the rivers inside."

Qi Yun didn't press him, putting away his phone and thoughtfully stroking his chin.

Indeed, as the other party said, exploration of the deep interior of the mournful old fir by the outside world might not even be one percent. Even local geographers might not find that place.

Even if a scientific expedition wanted to conduct research, they would only explore the periphery.

Could it be that to go there, I'd have to take this old guide along?