

Middle Age 671

Chapter 671: Back to Beijing

The Warden's Office.

Warden Wang noticed that Qi Yun had finished his business here and, as usual, did not ask any unnecessary questions; he just took out some fine tea leaves to entertain him.

Qi Yun was in no hurry to leave. He sipped tea while chatting casually with him.

"Warden Wang, I have a question for you."

"Uh-huh." Warden Wang put down his teacup and sat upright, "Consultant Qi, please go ahead."

Qi Yun organized his thoughts for a moment and tentatively asked, "For a heavy criminal like Yao Yuzhong, has there ever been a case where they were temporarily taken out of prison?"

Warden Wang was taken aback for a moment, his small eyes blinking quickly, and soon he seemed to realize something, then chuckled, "In our first prison, it hasn't happened, but there are such precedents in other places."

"According to regulations, unless a serious criminal is needed to identify a significant case scene or has special medical needs, and after approval by the higher authority, they can be temporarily released from prison, but they must remain under surveillance the entire time."

"For someone like Yao Yuzhong, they are an important control subject. If you want to take them out temporarily..."

He paused, looked at Qi Yun, and added, "The medical approval process is quite complicated, with many procedures. It can't be approved in less than a month."

"If he's involved in a major case, it should be easier..."

Anyone who has reached a certain level in their career hasn't done so without considerable acumen. Setting aside work capabilities, they are quite adept in social affairs. Not only did he answer Qi Yun's question, but he also guessed his intention and directly provided the direction for action.

Qi Yun nodded satisfied, thinking this guy was quite interesting and had a lot of room for future improvement.

"Haha, alright, I understand. Thank you, Warden Wang."

"Ah, there's no need to thank me, it's just part of my job." Warden Wang waved his hand repeatedly.

"Consultant Qi, if you're free tonight, shall I treat you to a meal? A relative of mine just brought back a goose from the countryside yesterday."

Qi Yun checked his watch and gave an apologetic smile, "Thank you for your kind offer, Warden Wang, but I have to make a trip to Beijing shortly, so I won't be able to join for dinner."

"Next time, if you come to Province J, give me a call, and I'll arrange something for you."

Upon hearing this, Warden Wang's eyes lit up, and a broad smile spread across his face.

All his efforts were for this very moment.

"Oh my! That would be great! I've long wanted to stroll across that great grassland, so I'll definitely reach out for your help when I visit."

"Haha, alright! I'll take my leave then." Qi Yun said as he got up to leave.

Warden Wang hurriedly saw him off, only bending down to wave goodbye after sending him to his car, "Consultant Qi, take care on the road. If you need any assistance from us, feel free to call us anytime."

...

Ning County, a luxury brand counter in a mall.

Yao Fengjuan was holding a pricey handbag, unable to put it down.

The girlfriend she often played mahjong with glanced at her and joked, "If you like it, just buy it. What's the matter? Afraid your husband will say something?"

"You won enough money at the table yesterday to buy this bag, so what's there to hesitate about?"

Yao Fengjuan chuckled and shook her head, reluctantly putting the bag back, "Forget it, it's too flashy, not suitable for me."

The girlfriend didn't say much, picking up another one beside her and swinging it on her wrist, "Hey, does this bag look good on me?"

"..."

The two of them wandered around the mall for a good half-day before parting ways at the parking lot.

Just as Yao Fengjuan got into her Volkswagen CC and merged into the main road, she heard a "bang!" Her car lost control and surged forward several meters.

Her heart nearly jumped out of her chest in fright; she gripped the steering wheel tightly, slamming on the brakes to stop the car.

Still shaken, she looked back and saw in the rearview mirror that a black SUV had rear-ended her CC.

Her first instinct wasn't to call the police but to hastily take out her phone and call her husband.

"Honey! I've been in a car accident! Hurry and come over!"

Elsewhere, a small restaurant beside the highway.

Li Dachun irritably tossed his phone aside and shouted into his earpiece, "Hey, brothers, I need to step out for a bit. Erleng, take command. Keep pushing forward with our men; we must take them down today!"

With that, he grabbed his coat and hurried downstairs.

Ten minutes later, the dust-covered Old Gui quietly arrived on the second floor.

With nimble hands, he searched every corner of this black market shop, packing up all the valuables, and finally came to the safe, trying to break it open.

Qi Yun had promised to spare Yao Yuzhong and his wife from prison, but all these illegal gains had to be confiscated, otherwise it would not justify Li Dachun's arrogant attitude from yesterday.

...

8 PM, Beijing, in Wendong's study.

Qi Yun sat properly on the sofa, unsure why this leader had asked him to come over in the evening.

Wendong did not intentionally delay meeting him but had been continually working since Qi Yun entered the study.

As the pot of tea was nearly finished, Wendong finally put down his pen and tiredly removed his glasses, rubbing his brow.

"You're here."

Qi Yun nodded obediently, "Yes, I saw you were busy, so I didn't disturb you."

Wendong gave a small nod, took the briefcase by his side, and pulled out a file folder, handing it to Qi Yun, "Take a look at this first."

Qi Yun got up to take the file folder, feeling a bit curious.

Upon opening it, he found several sheets inside with names and detailed identity information, all bearing long, foreign names.

"Leader, what is this...?" Qi Yun looked at Wendong with confusion.

"This is the list of personnel that Guo An discovered CIA inserted into the Oil Country."

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"CIA! Guo An..."

Qi Yun once again felt the immense power of this department, capable of grasping even such top-secret information.

Wendong got up from the chair, sat on the sofa next to Qi Yun, and said with a serious expression, "This time, the commotion caused by Salaman is significant. It has thoroughly enraged certain people, and the situation is developing towards an uncontrollable direction. Conflict is inevitable."

"There are some things that we can't conveniently express an opinion on, let alone directly participate in, so we hope you can convey the content of this document to him on a personal basis, as a form of reciprocation for his rescue of our personnel this time."

Qi Yun nodded and put away the document: "Okay, I understand, I'll take care of this shortly."

"Hmm." Wendong didn't give more instructions and seemed to trust Qi Yun to handle things well.

"Also, stay put in the country for a while; you might undergo a formal review soon. Don't overthink it, it's just a routine procedure before appointment."

Qi Yun felt a stir in his heart, is it finally here...

Ever since the transfer to Skyline Headquarters, he had anticipated this.

There are precedents for transferring from a state-owned enterprise to an administrative position, but it's uncertain what role they'll ultimately arrange for him.

If he's unsatisfied by then, can he refuse?

While these thoughts lingered in his mind, there was a knock on the door outside; the housekeeper came to call Wendong for dinner.

Wendong stood up, patted Qi Yun's shoulder, and politely asked, "Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I just came over from L Province, I could stay and eat a bit." Qi Yun replied with a sincere smile, without any reservations.

Wendong was momentarily stunned, as if to say, did I invite you?

Then he chuckled, "Alright then, let's eat together, just a simple meal, don't mind it."

The dishes were indeed simple, two meat, two vegetables, and a soup. They didn't discuss work over the meal, and after eating, Qi Yun excused himself and left.

In the car, he immediately called Salaman, hinting at the news about the list.

Salaman, being sharp, instantly guessed the source of the list, though he didn't mention it, only expressing gratitude to Qi Yun.

"How should I hand it over to you?" Qi Yun frowned and asked.

The situation in Oil Country was sensitive now, and he wasn't sure if sending it directly over the internet would be intercepted.

Salaman offered a solution: "Please have someone bring the document to the embassy; people there have secure channels to deliver it to me."

"Alright, I'll take it over myself now."

"Thank you so much, Qi, you will be a lifelong friend of mine, Salaman!"

Qi Yun scratched his ear; the tone sounded sincere, but who knows how much of it is true.

...

Two hours later, the car arrived at the family quarters of the National Cultural Heritage Administration.

The security here was relatively relaxed, allowing the car to go directly under Xiao Hanguang's building.

Since he was in Beijing, Qi Yun took the chance to visit his important contact, hoping to ask for a favor.

As he entered, Qi Yun placed the gift he bought on the roadside, glanced around, as it was his first time visiting the home.

A three-bedroom apartment, the décor was nothing graceful or stylish, just ordinary.

"Is it just you at home?"

"Yes." Xiao Hanguang gestured to the sofa without explaining further, "What are you here for in the middle of the night?"

"It's been a while since I've received guidance from the leader, so I came specially to visit you." Qi Yun grinned, taking a bottle of mineral water from the coffee table and unscrewing it.

Xiao Hanguang glanced at him, his tone teasing, "Cut it out, kid, I can tell what you want as soon as you raise your butt, just spill it! Speak up and head out, don't disturb my rest!"

Qi Yun didn't mind, still smiling, "Has Xiao Han reported that matter to you?"

Xiao Hanguang nodded, "Yes, he told me, I've already arranged for local cultural bureau personnel to go to the site, there should be news tomorrow."

Saying this, he raised an eyebrow, "What's the hurry? The item hasn't been retrieved yet, and you're rushing over to claim credit?"

"Leader, how could you say that, am I that kind of person..." Qi Yun feigns grievance, then explains the purpose of his visit, "Actually, there's another matter to report, concerning the ancient cypress..."

A few minutes later, after listening to Qi Yun's account, Xiao Hanguang showed a thoughtful expression.

"Can you be sure he's telling the truth?"

Qi Yun nodded, "I feel it's highly likely."

"What are your intentions?"

"I want to take Yao Yuzhong into the mountains for a look, but I'm uncertain about his physical condition, so I'd like you to help me find two experts who understand geomancy."

"You plan to go in yourself?" Xiao Hanguang looked at him in surprise, his tone serious, "That's a real primeval forest; no one knows what the situation is. Don't mess around, kid."

"The thrill-seeking youth shouldn't play like this."

Qi Yun also put away his smile, speaking earnestly, "Leader, I am aware of the dangers of the ancient cypress, but... I have reasons I must go, reasons I cannot disclose at the moment."

"Rest assured, I will make full preparations before setting out..."

"Another reason?" Xiao Hanguang rolled his eyes, interrupting, "Why do these words sound so familiar?"

Qi Yun awkwardly scratched his nose, some things were hard to express.

It wasn't about distrusting Xiao Hanguang, but he didn't know how to explain...

He couldn't very well say that he knew the ancient cypress contained a Can Cong eyeball, it sounded like pure fantasy...

After a long silence, Xiao Hanguang saw Qi Yun's determined stance and eventually sighed, "Fine, kid, do what you will. One day, once you lose your life, you might settle down."

"I can find people for you, but the rest is up to you."

"Thank you, Leader!" Qi Yun grinned widely.

...

The next day, at L Province First Prison.

"Yao Yuzhong!"

"Present!"

"Come with me!"

Yao Yuzhong followed the prison guard to Warden Wang's office, where two unfamiliar people were waiting.

Warden Wang placed a document into a file cabinet, then nodded at Yao Yuzhong, "Go with them immediately."

"Remember, cooperate fully, no tricks."

Yao Yuzhong paused, a flicker of surprise in his murky eyes as he examined the two burly strangers, instantly guessing at something.

"Let's go." One of them took him by the arm and led him outside.

Warden Wang followed them out, though the escort wasn't meant for him.

Outside the prison, an unmarked car was waiting. Yao Yuzhong was pushed into the backseat, the door closed with a "bang," and it drove directly towards the airport.

A few hours later, in a hotel in Beijing, Yao Yuzhong met the familiar young man.

"How does it feel to regain your freedom?" Qi Yun sat on the sofa, smiling lightly as he asked.

Yao Yuzhong stood there dumbfounded, his heart already a stormy sea.

He had been sentenced to death in the first trial, commuted to life in the second; such a serious offense, yet this young man managed to get him out of the high walls in just one day.

He knew it was temporary, but it was still enough to shock him profoundly.

Even with Guo An's small booklet, it wasn't possible to reach this step, was it?

Qi Yun signaled to the man, "Unlock his cuffs."

The latter took out a key from his pocket and, with a click, unlocked Yao Yuzhong's handcuffs.

"Come, sit down and let's talk."

Qi Yun gestured for Yao Yuzhong to sit down and came straight to the point, "You should be able to guess the reason I brought you out, right?"

Yao Yuzhong nodded, speaking briefly, "I understand."

"Good, then."

"Cooperate well, once it's done, saying I'll release you is an exaggeration, but ensuring you have a better time inside is no problem."

Qi Yun painted a rosy picture, then picked up a list from the table and handed it over, "I've had someone gather the equipment. We're leaving tomorrow; see if there's anything else needed on this list."

Chapter 673: Entering the Mountains

That afternoon, the Qi Yun team arrived in full force in Beijing, except for the group under Gao Min and A Ming, who stayed back.

Additionally, two Feng Shui experts found by Xiao Hanguang also arrived at the hotel.

"Boss, the people have arrived." Brother Quan led the two individuals into the room.

One was older, about the same age as Yao Yuzhong, although he had no white hair and looked robust, similar to the elderly men who do morning exercises and tree-hitting in the neighborhood.

He was wearing a Tang suit and fiddling with a string of rosewood Buddha beads in his left hand, exuding quite an air.

The younger one was in his forties, with a rather cold appearance, a tall and upright figure, and a demeanor somewhat similar to Xiao Wu, indicating he might also be a martial artist.

Qi Yun initially thought that the people Xiao Hanguang found would be experts and scholars from the bureau, but looking at these two, they didn't seem to fit that impression.

He put down his work and got up to greet them: "Haha, are you the experts recommended by Director Xiao? I am Qi Yun. Our journey to the Ai Lao mountains will require your expertise."

The elder gentleman cupped his hands towards Qi Yun: "Mr. Qi, you're too kind. I am no expert; everyone calls me Qin Sizhi, you can also call me Old Qin."

"This is my apprentice, Jin Bao."

The middle-aged man named Jin Bao also cupped his fists toward Qi Yun: "Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Qi."

Qi Yun smiled and nodded, his gaze instinctively falling on the old man's hands, noticing that his right hand was missing a little finger, only four fingers remaining!

No wonder he's called Qin Sizhi, the name fits quite well...

Xiao Hanguang only mentioned that these two were quite capable and met his requirements, without detailing much else, so Qi Yun was still unsure of their backgrounds.

Qi Yun withdrew his gaze and gestured them over: "Old Qin, Brother Jin, please have a seat here."

The three of them sat on the sofa, and Qi Yun handed over the list of equipment, supplemented by Yao Yuzhong: "Please take a look to see if we need to add anything for our trip to the mountains."

Qin Sizhi took the list, glanced at it, and his gaze paused on the large quantity of realgar powder, asking Qi Yun in confusion: "May I ask, Mr. Qi, why so much realgar powder...?"

There are snakes, insects, and rats in the Ai Lao mountains, but isn't ten kilograms a bit overboard?

Qi Yun thought for a moment, then called to Brother Quan at the door: "Brother Quan, please bring Old Yao over."

"Please wait a moment, I'll have someone else explain the specifics to you."

Brother Quan acknowledged and soon returned with Old Yao.

As soon as Yao Yuzhong entered, his gaze landed on Qin Sizhi, showing a look of astonishment.

Qin Sizhi glanced back at him, his hand holding the teacup paused in mid-air.

Qi Yun was about to introduce them but noticed their strange reaction.

His gaze shifted between Yao Yuzhong and Qin Sizhi, forming a suspicion, and he chuckled lightly: "It seems you two know each other? What a coincidence."

Yao Yuzhong snapped back, with a somewhat complex expression on his face.

Qin Sizhi put down his teacup, a trace of wistfulness flashing in his eyes: "Old Yao, I thought we'd never cross paths again in this lifetime, and here we are today."

Yao Yuzhong sat beside them, explaining: "Mr. Qi asked me to guide the way for him."

Qin Sizhi nodded slightly, sighing: "As long as we're still alive, it's good."

After just a few words, neither of them spoke further, as if they weren't very familiar.

Qi Yun addressed Yao Yuzhong: "Old Yao, Old Qin is here to assist us, he'll be traveling with us, give him a detailed introduction of the situation."

Yao Yuzhong nodded and began narrating.

However, he did not mention the treasure, only saying they were searching for something there.

At first, Qin Sizhi had no reaction, but upon hearing about the large number of snakes in the cave, his expression turned uneasy.

"Old Qin, is there an issue?" Qi Yun asked, noticing his demeanor.

Qin Sizhi pondered slightly, then countered: "Do you know why that place is called Ai Lao mountains?"

Qi Yun shook his head; he hadn't researched this.

But from Yao Yuzhong's demeanor, it seemed he knew something, yet he stayed silent.

Qin Sizhi fiddled with the Buddha beads and began to speak slowly: "Before the Qin dynasty, an ancient kingdom settled in the mountains, known as Ailao Kingdom."

"Legend has it that the ancestors of Ailao Kingdom descended from Jiulong, born to a mother named Shayi who conceived after touching a fallen log, and among their nine sons, Jiulong, the most virtuous, became the king, thus establishing the Ailao Kingdom."

"The Ailao Kingdom resided in the Ai Lao mountain range for generations, the mountains were rampant with miasma and snakes and insects, so the ancestors figured out a way to co-exist with the snakes for survival."

"They would deliberately leave resting spots in dark places, allowing the snake groups to prey on other pests; over time, the snake's sloughs and gallbladders became medicinal, and snakes turned into a totem for the Ailao Kingdom."

"If what you mentioned about that cave is true, the person who hid things there is definitely aware of the cave's situation, doing it on purpose."

"He might even be a descendant of the Ailao Kingdom or someone knowledgeable about its history, likely possessing methods to manipulate the snake groups."

Yao Yuzhong showed no change in expression, but Qi Yun felt a shock in his heart, unprepared for this piece of history being involved.

It seemed that back then, the profit-seeker or someone around him was capable of controlling those snake groups, enabling five hundred porters to move the treasure deep into the cave.

With this thought, Qi Yun cast a glance at Yao Yuzhong.

Was this guy really unaware of these circumstances, or was he hiding something all along?

"So... with this sulfur powder, can we drive the snakes out of the cave?" Jin Bao, who had been silent, asked Qin Sizhi, with rare hesitation on his otherwise unyielding face.

Chapter 674: Entering the Mountains (Part 2)

Qin Sizhi paused his hand that was twirling the Buddha beads and gently shook his head: "Ordinary snakes and insects fear sulfur, but the creatures in this cave are an unknown factor."

"I only came across this piece of history accidentally and I've never personally been inside Ai Laoshan, so I can't be certain."

Qi Yun frowned, thought for a moment, and said: "Bring two flamethrowers, and carry some extra gasoline to try as well."

Qin Sizhi nodded slightly: "That's the best we can do."

After discussing the matter, Qi Yun had Brother Quan take Qin Sizhi and his apprentice to the next room to rest, leaving behind Yao Yuzhong alone.

Yao Yuzhong seemed to guess what the former wanted to ask him, and spoke proactively before being questioned: "I am not aware of the circumstances he mentioned. Back then, when I was researching that place, I only focused on recent geographic county records."

Qi Yun looked at him for two seconds, then smiled and waved his hand: "Hehe, Old Yao, you're overthinking. Since I brought you out, it's natural that I trust you."

Yao Yuzhong's face twitched slightly, he somehow felt that Qi Yun's smile had a sinister undertone.

Qi Yun continued: "I was going to ask about those two from earlier, tell me about their situation."

Yao Yuzhong turned his head in surprise, as if to say weren't they brought by you? You aren't familiar with them?

"They were found by friends, and they didn't tell me specific backgrounds." Qi Yun explained.

Yao Yuzhong nodded and began to speak about Qin Sizhi: "This old guy used to be in the same line of work as me, he could be considered a top person among the Southern Climbers."

Qi Yun thought to himself, as expected, no wonder Qin Sizhi and his apprentice gave him a strange feeling, completely different from professors like Hua Weiguo and Wei Xueming.

But why did Xiao Hanguang bring a Tomb Raider over?

"That year someone was cooking up something in Western Shanxi, both he and I went, targeting an ancient Tang Dynasty tomb."

"The operation went smoothly at first, and we found a lot of valuable items underground, but... we encountered an accident when exiting, someone attacked us."

"I was the first to get out, so I luckily escaped, but many people were blocked behind, and I heard Qin Sizhi was among them."

"Later, I hid in Northern Mongolia for a while, and from friends, heard some rumors that Qin Sizhi was captured. At first, I didn't quite believe it, but now it seems very likely."

Captured?

Qi Yun was stunned, no wonder Xiao Hanguang would send him a Tomb Raider, it turns out this is the reason.

"Is there really a thing as being captured in your line of work, where one could lose their head?"

"Why weren't you captured back then?"

Yao Yuzhong pursed his lips: "They likely valued Qin Sizhi's ability. They have a teacher-inherited lineage, unlike my kind of wild path."

"As for being captured..."

He paused, with a hint of sentiment in his tone, "Times were different, technology wasn't as advanced as it is now, to enter big tombs required real skill, the officials needed people like him, so they were willing to give them a chance to make up for their crimes."

"Things are different now, cultural protection is stronger and the officials have trained enough talent, they no longer need people like us who have become tainted."

Qi Yun nodded slightly, acknowledging the other party's explanation.

Country now rarely takes the initiative to open those tombs, only those that have been damaged by Tomb Raiders undergo protective excavation.

For instance, the Genghis Khan Mausoleum found in Northern Mongolia last time was first excavated by people sent by De Gaulle, which led to Qi Yun and Hua Weiguo going down later.

"Then aren't you quite unlucky, didn't catch the right time." Qi Yun teased.

Yao Yuzhong forced a wry smile: "There's nothing lucky or unlucky, those of us in this line have long been prepared to face gunfire at any moment, I'm already very grateful to the government for allowing me to survive."

"Haha, you have a very clear mindset."

Qi Yun also laughed, then asked, "Hey, what's up with his finger?"

"His right hand has a special skill."

"Special skill?"

...

The next day, a Gulfstream G700 loaded with various equipment flew towards Yunnan Province.

By the time Qi Yun and the others landed, it was already noon.

The local cultural heritage bureau had already prepared the necessary vehicles for them in advance, and the group of more than ten people had a simple meal in Nanzhao, then drove towards Ai Laoshan.

Nanzhao is west of Ai Laoshan, about three hundred kilometers away from there.

The car drove on the highway for two or three hours, then turned onto winding mountain roads, driving for another seventy to eighty kilometers before the asphalt road gradually turned into gravel, the wheels crunching over the stones, and the scenery outside the window turned into vast broadleaf forests.

The air was mixed with the scent of decayed leaves and damp earth, and the silhouette of Ai Laoshan was looming in the distant mist.

Ai Laoshan is currently a closed nature reserve, except for the outermost area, the core zone is prohibited from entry.

The end of the gravel road is a large reservoir, and there's a checkpoint ahead with a no access sign. You can't go any further, and there's no drivable road beyond this point.

The lead car stopped at the checkpoint entrance, Old Yao got out to negotiate with the management, and then the gates slowly opened up allowing the convoy to drive through.

At this point, the sky was getting dark, so they had to spend the night at the checkpoint and set off into the mountains at dawn.

At the foot of the mountain, the temperature was very low, different from the northern chill, it was a bone-penetrating damp coldness, especially being near the reservoir, that damp coolness seeped through collars and cuffs into the skin.

Everyone changed into their windbreakers and squeezed into the checkpoint to warm up by the fire.

"Come, leaders, have some tea." A dark-skinned ranger brought over two cups of tea.

Qi Yun took them and thanked him, inviting him to sit down by the fire as well.

The tea was just ordinary tea that cost a few yuan per pack, yet at this moment, Qi Yun found it better than the Da Hong Pao he'd bought for hundreds of thousands per pound before.

"Leaders, are you here for scientific research?"

The ranger curiously sized them up, "Last month, some teachers also came, but they didn't bring as much equipment as you, went in the morning and came out in the afternoon."

People here like to call those who are educated and knowledgeable as teachers, however, earlier he showed him badges with national emblems on them, so he called Qi Yun and his group leaders here.

Qi Yun smiled back, replying, "Yes, we're here for research, and we may need to stay in there a bit longer."

"Then you must be very careful, the mountains are very dangerous, there's black bear spirits! When they stand, they're taller than a person!" The ranger made an exaggerated face, kindly warning everyone.

"Hmm, we will be cautious."

Knowing there are many big animals in the mountains, Qi Yun specifically got a few tranquilizer guns along with potent tranquilizers for this trip.

Even if they encounter wild boars or leopards, they can handle it.

Seeing him taking it seriously, the ranger felt relieved and added a dry log to the fire: "Not just animals, it's been raining constantly these days, those slopes and cliffs are very slick....."

It seemed like the ranger rarely met living souls, as he kept talking until Qi Yun started yawning, making him realize it was getting late.

At night, everyone wrapped in sleeping bags spent the night resting at the checkpoint, and the next day, they embarked on the mountain path before the break of dawn.

As the ranger mentioned, the road was all muddy, with shoes quickly caked in yellow mud, making the hiking boots lose their original traction and become slippery underfoot.

Yao Yuzhong, who was leading ahead, almost slipped several times, but fortunately, Niu Da, who was constantly watching over him, caught him.

In contrast, Qin Sizhi seemed much more composed, both he and his apprentice were remarkable, their steps steady, and core strength impressive.

Stumbling along like this, they walked for about an hour until the sun rose, and the team fully left the secure zone and entered a sparsely inhabited area.

The surrounding trees became increasingly dense, with thick trunks crisscrossing, the canopy so dense that even sunlight had a hard time filtering through.

The air was heavy with moisture, making breathing feel stifling.

At the very front, Brother Quan suddenly stopped, crouched to examine the ground: "Looks like bear tracks."

An Zai and the others behind him turned, gripping their tranquilizer guns, and vigilantly scanned the surroundings.

Chapter 675: You're The One Who Narrowed Your Own Path...

The Asian black bear is also known as the moon bear, often referred to as the "black blind" by folks in the Northeast. In Ai Laoshan's scientific documentaries, there have been multiple shots capturing traces of this bear.

At this moment, not far from Qi Yun and his group, there was such a big creature.

Its entire body was jet black, with glossy, oily fur. It was even bigger than the largest, most robust member of the group, Niu Da. It had a tuft of white fur on its chest, and its round eyes were wide open, holding a wild vigilance, staring fixedly at the intruders of its territory.

Perhaps because its feeding was interrupted, it still had a piece of bark-like object in its mouth. Its black nose twitched slightly, seemingly trying to discern the intent of these unwelcome guests.

Qi Yun had seen such a massive creature before. The last time when he encountered a brown bear in the wild, it was even larger than this one, so he wasn't particularly nervous.

He raised his hand and made a gesture to signal An Zai and the others to hold their fire and stay calm.

"Keep moving, don't engage unless it comes closer."

Generally, a black bear won't attack humans unless provoked or feeling threatened. Right now, this black bear was merely being vigilant, so there was no need to bother it.

Although a tranquilizer gun wouldn't cause substantial harm, this was an undeveloped primeval forest. A black bear deprived of its mobility would undoubtedly become prey for other carnivorous animals.

Luckily, this black bear was quite perceptive and seemed to realize that these men were not to be messed with, so it didn't forcefully try to cause a scene. The group slowly left its territory.

The further they went into the mountains, the more robust the vegetation became. The tree trunks were entwined with circles of blue-green vines, which looked eerily like snakes winding around the trees, quite frightening at first glance.

A thick layer of fallen branches and leaves covered the ground, crunching underfoot. The wild mushrooms that were sold at exorbitant prices outside were everywhere here.

After trekking for over an hour, Qi Yun checked his watch, which indeed started to spin erratically, like back in Lop Nur. The phone also lost signal.

"Old Yao, is the direction correct?"

Yao Yuzhong stopped for a breath, his gaze fixed on the leaves of the surrounding trees, "Yes, these leaves can be used to distinguish direction. The side facing the sun grows denser, and the undersides have sparse leaves. We should keep walking toward the denser leaves."

In the primeval forest, there were not many reference points. The heliotropism of plants was the most reliable compass.

"Once we cross this mountain top, we should reach the location where I encountered the mist-like gas last time," Yao Yuzhong added.

Although many years had passed, the memory of his last trip to Ai Laoshan was etched in his mind, still crystal clear even now.

"We'd better pick up the pace and cross this mountain before noon. Based on my experience with gas in the Shu Region, it tends to rise when the sunlight is strong," suggested Qin Sizhi from behind.

Qi Yun immediately agreed, "Alright, Brother Quan! Let's pick up the pace!"

The group increased their speed. When they reached the mountain top, they indeed saw a faint, fog-like white gas swirling in the saddle of the mountain, exactly the mist Yao Yuzhong had mentioned.

For safety reasons, everyone took out the pre-prepared gas masks from their bags and put them on, not delaying further, they continued their descent.

Two hours later, they arrived at a relatively flat open area in the valley, with many rocks scattered on the ground.

Yao Yuzhong squatted down and picked up a stone to observe it.

The stone was smooth, with clear signs of having been eroded by water flow. From this, he deduced that the ground below was once a riverbed.

However, whether it was the same river as when he last came remained uncertain, as the mountain's heavy rainfall often caused mudslides, making river courses subject to change.

Yao Yuzhong threw away the stone, stood up, and slowly turned in a circle, carefully observing the surrounding mountainous terrain, muttering to himself.

"What's he doing?" Qi Yun curiously asked Qin Sizhi.

Qin Sizhi glanced towards Yao Yuzhong and explained in a lowered voice, "He's referencing the mountain terrain, seeking the places where water vapor converges, which is what everyone commonly refers to as feng shui."

"Feng shui encompasses many principles, combining theories of yin and yang, the five elements, the heavenly stems and earthly branches, Bagua, and the Nine Palaces, enabling the seeker to locate dragons, inspect the shape of the land, observe water, pinpoint specific sites, and determine proper orientations."

"In contemporary scientific terms, feng shui is actually a comprehensive natural science involving geophysics, hydrological geology, astral science, meteorology, environmental science, architecture, ecology, and human life information science."

"This discipline originated during the Warring States period with Guiguzi. Due to its complex knowledge system, few, even among his disciples, mastered it. Later, during the Eastern Jin dynasty, Guo Pu authored the 'Zangjing,' which helped systematize it and gradually spread its concepts."

Qi Yun, though somewhat confused, gathered from Qin Sizhi's explanation that this was indeed difficult to learn. Considering Yao Yuzhong's limited formal education, probably barely literate, how did he learn this?

Qin Sizhi seemed to read Qi Yun's mind and chuckled, "If it's just for finding graves, with diligent study, frequent exploration, and basic understanding, it's achievable."

"However, reaching the realm of Yuan Tiangang or Li Chunfeng, who could examine the heavens and measure the earth, relies on innate talent. Historically, only they attained such heights."

Qi Yun nodded; indeed, Yao Yuzhong's dedication to this field was commendable.

"So, how does Old Qin's feng shui compare to his?"

Chapter 676: You've Narrowed Your Own Path... (2)

His question was not purely out of curiosity; he wanted to evaluate Qin Sizhi's strength to avoid being led by the nose by Yao Yuzhong all the time.

If this old man tries any tricks and takes them to a dangerous place, it wouldn't be impossible for him to escape during a commotion.

After all, the taste of being stuck in a bitter kiln is hard to endure.

Although Yao Yuzhong seemed quite cooperative on the surface, who knows if he's deliberately putting on an act to make everyone else drop their guard, and then look for an opportunity to escape.

One must be cautious.

This is also one of the reasons why Qi Yun had Xiao Hanguang find two other people to help him.

Qin Sizhi did not directly answer Qi Yun's question but smiled and shook his head: "I walk a different path from him, but Mr. Qi, please rest assured, when it's my turn to act, I won't be ambiguous."

This guy is smart too, and with his assurance, Qi Yun said no more.

While they were talking, raindrops started to fall from the sky. Fortunately, Yao Yuzhong had already found the direction, pointing northeast: "It should be over there."

"But we must first detour north to quickly leave the valley to avoid encountering mudslides!"

"Okay, let's go." With Qi Yun's command, the team set off immediately.

Yao Yuzhong and Brother Quan led the way in the front, while Niu Da closely followed Old Deng, watching him the entire time. Qi Yun's task for him was singular: keep a close watch on the opponent.

They continued walking from daytime until night, and as the rain slightly lessened, the team re-entered the forest.

Yao Yuzhong stopped and, full of fatigue, said to Qi Yun, "Let's rest here tonight. Tomorrow, we'll follow the river below north for a dozen kilometers, and we'll reach that cave."

Qi Yun scanned the surroundings but found nothing unusual under the spotlight's beam.

He turned his gaze to Qin Sizhi, who blinked, prompting Qi Yun to signal his men to start setting up camp.

The nighttime temperature in the mountains had dropped below zero, making everyone shiver. After hastily filling their stomachs, they each crawled into their tents to rest.

Brother Quan called An Zai and Da Pao over for instructions, telling them to take turns keeping watch while the rest could sleep peacefully. Soon, the sound of snoring rose from the tents.

Late at night, the forest was quiet, with only insects chirping and the "tuh-tuh" of raindrops hitting the soil.

An Zai sat in the center of the camp on a small stool, dozing off, his head nodding repeatedly. The bright flashlight in his hand tilted towards the ground, the light flickering on and off.

Behind him in the tent, a head quietly poked out; it was Yao Yuzhong.

With sharp eyes, he scanned the camp. After observing for a moment, he gently lifted the tent corner and stealthily stepped out without making a sound.

As for Niu Da, who was sharing the tent with him, it was unclear when he stopped snoring, seemingly unaware of Yao Yuzhong's departure.

Yao Yuzhong slowly walked under a tree some distance away, unbuckling his pants, pretending to relieve himself, but his peripheral vision never left the camp, quietly observing.

He stood there for four to five minutes, confirming no one noticed him, then darted into the dense forest to the left.

At this moment, he moved with agility, as quick as an antelope, no longer the weak and frail man he appeared to be by day.

Just as he left, An Zai suddenly opened his eyes, shaking off his sleepiness.

He glanced in Yao Yuzhong's direction, a sneer on his face, then rose and approached Qi Yun's tent to wake him.

Qi Yun awoke groggily, rubbing his eyes: "Did he run?"

"He ran; the guy was definitely pretending during the day; his legs are even faster than Bolt's," An Zai affirmed with a nod.

Qi Yun chuckled and picked up his clothes from beside him.

"Go see what's up with Niu Da."

The two approached Yao Yuzhong's tent, where An Zai reached out to touch Niu Da's neck, then patted his cheeks, calling out: "Wake up, Old Niu!"

"Wake up!"

Niu Da was startled awake and quickly sat up, his eyes first dazed, then filled with rage as he glanced at the flattened sleeping bag beside him, cursing: "That old fart made me smell something terrible; when I catch him, I'll thrash him twice!"

He had been sleeping deeply to cooperate with Yao Yuzhong's escape. Otherwise, given their elite special forces alertness and preparedness, how could he have fallen for such a trick?

Qi Yun shone his flashlight around the tent, discovering some plant resembling petals, in light purple and green hues.

He picked them up with two sticks to inspect, but couldn't identify what type of flower they were.

In another tent not far away, Qin Sizhi had long been awake, shaking his head with a bitter smile and sighing softly: "Old Yao, you're really limiting yourself here..."

"Did they know he was going to run all along?" His disciple Jin Bao, now energized, asked his master.

Qin Sizhi nodded: "This Mr. Qi is sharp; bringing us here proves he never truly trusted Old Yao."

"Old Yao has been locked up too long; his mind is muddled..."

.....

The next morning, everyone gradually crawled out of their tents.

Qi Yun found Qin Sizhi and showed him the petals discovered last night: "Mr. Qin, can you identify what kind of flower this is?"

Qin Sizhi took the petals directly with his hand, sniffing them at the nose, then pinching the fine fuzz on the petals with his fingertips, furrowing his brow: "This should be a variant of the hypnosis flower, some places call it the drunken flower, used to brew alcohol."

"I've seen similar flowers like this in the Shu Region. They usually grow in areas where poisonous gases breed. Smelling too long causes dizziness, but they're not poisonous, and the effects wear off after a few hours."

He pointed to the green one: "This is called snake grass; it has a nerve-paralyzing effect and is commonly found in dark, damp places."

Assured the plants were non-toxic, Qi Yun said no more, and called for Niu Da and the others to pack up their tents.

When they set off again, their group was two people short: Yao Yuzhong and Brother Quan.

However, Qi Yun and the others, including Qin Sizhi and his pupil, tacitly avoided discussing them.

This time, the one clearing the path at the forefront was the old eagle.

He walked, stopped, his gaze constantly scanning ahead, seemingly searching for something.

Moreover, the direction of the team's advance had changed; it was no longer following the northern river path Yao Yuzhong mentioned last night but heading east.

After about an hour, the old eagle suddenly stopped in his tracks, furrowing his brow and observing around.

Qi Yun came to his side and asked: "Can't find the mark?"

The old eagle nodded: "Yes, I haven't seen his marks for almost two kilometers."

Qi Yun heard this, not the least bit anxious, turned and shouted to Qin Sizhi: "Master Qin, it's your turn."

Qin Sizhi chuckled and slowly stepped forward.

After roughly observing the terrain, he crouched, his fingers sinking into the soil. He pinched some dirt and smelled it, then rose to provide an answer.

"This way."

Qi Yun gestured to the old eagle, who continued to lead the way in the direction Qin Sizhi indicated.

After moving a distance, Qi Yun's ears twitched, faintly hearing the sound of water ahead. Upon approaching, they indeed found a stream meandering through the rocks.

The old eagle also found a deliberately placed stone nearby and led the team upstream along the river.

The stream led to a wider river, striding through the valley for seven or eight kilometers, with towering mountain ranges appearing ahead.

Mountain peaks rose one after another, surrounded by clouds and mist, extending endlessly.

Seeing this scene, Qi Yun understood they had reached the destination.

The cave Yao Yuzhong spoke of was inside these mountain bodies, and the river water also flowed from the underground rivers within.

Qin Sizhi stroked his beard, surveying the mountain range: "This ridge is shaped like a hidden dragon, with peaks embracing on both sides, winds gathering in the middle—truly a feng shui treasure."

Qi Yun didn't care about feng shui; he stood on a massive rock for a better view, noticing two figures at the mountain's foot in the distance.

He quickly jumped off the rock and signaled the team to move forward.

Upon reaching closer, he recognized the two silhouettes, feeling relieved.

If it's not Brother Quan and Yao Yuzhong, who else could it be...

Chapter 677: Danger!

"Hehe, Old Yao, your legs are quite nimble, huh?"

Down the mountain, Qi Yun looked at Yao Yuzhong, who appeared dejected and lifeless, speaking with a mocking tone.

Yao Yuzhong stood up, dusted off his hands, and finally stopped pretending, speaking bluntly: "I admit defeat, do with me as you wish."

Qi Yun stared at him for a while, then sat down on a rock, pulled out a cigarette box and lit one up: "Tell me, why did you ditch us and sneak off here on your own?"

Yao Yuzhong remained silent, seemingly ready to give up.

"What's wrong, don't feel like talking?"

Qi Yun chuckled softly, and slowly continued, "I'm not a very patient person, I fast-forward through movies, and what I hate most is mind games."

"So, you'd better not play tricks with me, or else you might not even have the chance to go back and do time."

By the end of that sentence, his voice had turned cold, with a tone full of menace.

Yao Yuzhong felt a chill in his heart and shivered, knowing Qi Yun was not bluffing.

Considering he could call someone like Qin Sizhi to do his bidding, his background was likely far more complex than it seemed. Burying him in this mountain forever would be as simple as a word.

"I... I don't want to go back to jail, so I ran away while you were sleeping."

"If you don't want jail, why come here?" Qi Yun glanced at him, his gaze unfriendly, "Don't play dumb, Old Yao, you're a smart man, say something I want to hear."

Yao Yuzhong gritted his teeth, weighed the situation for two seconds, then seemed deflated, hoarsely replied, "I deliberately pointed you in the wrong direction, there's an underground river over there too, hoping to delay you."

"This area has many water systems; even Qin Sizhi, unfamiliar with the terrain, would find it hard to detect quickly."

"I planned to use this time to take some treasure from the cave and hide out in the east."

This outcome did not surprise Qi Yun; he sternly questioned, "With no equipment, how do you plan to avoid the cave's snake swarms?"

"Or is it... there's no snake swarm in the cave, have you been lying to me from the start?"

"I haven't lied to you." Yao Yuzhong shook his head, taking out petals from his pocket, the same ones used last night on Niu Da, lullaby flowers and snake grass.

"After narrowly escaping here years ago, I inflexibly went to the Li Family's chief mansion, where I found a note with methods to repel snake swarms, using these two kinds of flowers and grasses."

"The juice from mixing and crushing them not only can make people dizzy and numb, but snakes also hate the pungent smell and will avoid it."

"So, I wanted to try this method to see if I could successfully reach deeper inside..."

Qi Yun squinted after hearing this, realizing from when they first entered the mountain, Old Yao had been plotting. He feigned being crippled, requesting breaks to rest, which was likely when he collected these petals when Niu Da wasn't watching.

"You sure this method works?"

"Not sure... but I think it should work."

Qi Yun averted his gaze, pondered briefly, and stood up, patting Yao Yuzhong on the shoulder: "Old Yao, you have one chance, don't ruin it."

Yao Yuzhong bowed his head after two seconds of silence and responded, "Yes, I remember."

After sorting things out, Qi Yun found Qin Sizhi to discuss, telling him what Yao Yuzhong said, asking if those two plants truly have snake-repelling effects.

After analyzing, Qin Sizhi believed that it was likely true and expressed willingness to search for the two plants nearby with his apprentice.

Qi Yun did not object, letting Brother Quan take An Zai along with them.

After they left, Qi Yun turned his gaze toward the mountain in front, where a two-meter tall and three-meter wide cave entrance lay. An underground river water flowed out continuously, forming a small creek below, winding through the valley.

Vines and moss surrounded the edges of the cave entrance, dark and grim, like a silent giant mouth. Looking inside, only boundless darkness could be seen, eerie and intimidating.

"Is this the entrance to the cave?" Qi Yun asked Yao Yuzhong.

Yao Yuzhong dully replied, "Yes, right there."

Qi Yun said no more, signaling the eagle to return Yao Yuzhong's original gear to him.

"Eat something first, organize the equipment, leave anything unnecessary outside."

Since it's unclear if Yao Yuzhong's method truly works, it's best to enter light, carrying only essential weapons and tools, as too much weight could hinder movement and be dangerous.

After resting for about two hours, Brother Quan and Qin Sizhi returned, carrying a plastic bag filled with lullaby flowers and snake grass.

"Thank you for your hard work." Qi Yun stood up to greet them.

Qin Sizhi waved his hand, handing the bag to Qi Yun: "This should be enough, later crush them and apply the juice to exposed skin, avoiding the face."

"Alright." Qi Yun tasked Brother Quan to prepare it.

Seeing no one around, Qin Sizhi leaned in a bit closer and quietly said, "Mr. Qi, let us lead when we enter."

Qi Yun hadn't expected him to volunteer, smiled and nodded: "Alright, I'll rely on you two then."

"You're too kind, Mr. Qi." Qin Sizhi stroked his beard and explained, "My apprentice and I have traveled extensively, explored many ancient tombs, and have some experience dealing with various traps and mechanisms."

Chapter 678: Danger!

"Speaking of which, he glanced at Yao Yuzhong not far away, "The situation inside is unclear now. We'll go ahead first and can promptly warn if we encounter any danger."

Qi Yun understood his meaning.

Twenty minutes later, everyone had already smeared that special juice on themselves, then switched on their searchlights and walked into the cave entrance one by one.

Both An Zai and Da Pao each carried a flamethrower on their backs, in case Yao Yuzhong's method didn't work, they still had a way to fend off the snakes.

As soon as they approached the entrance, a moist and cool breeze hit them, making them involuntarily shiver.

The beam of the flashlight illuminated the scene inside the cave, which was very spacious, much taller than the entrance. The walls on both sides were covered with stalactites, in various shapes. Some resembled inverted icicles, very sharp. The consequences of being accidentally struck by them were unimaginable.

However, the scenery inside the cave was stunning. Under the illumination, these stalactites emitted a strange radiance, like polished jade, with a faint glow flowing inside, crystal clear and breathtakingly beautiful.

Just this kind of scenery, if it were outside, would at least sell you a 998 ticket.

Water droplets fell from the stalactites, forming puddles of various sizes on the ground as they struck it. The group walked one step deep, one step shallow, further into the cave.

Nearby, the underground river occasionally churned up splashes, whether it was fish or something else remained unknown.

Qin Sizhi walked at the front, the beam of the searchlight constantly sweeping over the ground and the rock walls above, with a vigilant look in his eyes.

Following him was his apprentice Jin Bao, holding a short knife in each hand, his gaze fixed firmly ahead while constantly watching the sides for any movements, ready to respond to sudden situations.

Next was Yao Yuzhong, who was expressionless and seemed indifferent.

Behind Yao Yuzhong were Brother Quan and Eagle, walking side by side, less than a meter away from Yao Yuzhong in front.

At this distance, Brother Quan was not worried about any tricks from the three people in front, even if someone suddenly turned against them, he could immediately take control of the situation with force.

Indeed, although Qin Sizhi and his apprentice had performed fairly reliably along the way and had indeed been helpful, the contact was too brief, and they weren't insiders.

Therefore, Qi Yun maintained vigilance at all times against these two, having already secretly instructed Brother Quan and Eagle to keep a close watch on Qin Sizhi and his apprentice, as well as Yao Yuzhong, and not give them any opportunity to act alone.

The group continued forward in the cave for more than ten minutes, with occasional bats fluttering overhead, but nothing else disturbed them.

"Look!"

Up ahead, Qin Sizhi suddenly stopped and pointed the beam of the searchlight at a pile of white bones by the rock wall.

Qi Yun followed the light and saw skulls, limbs, and some decayed cloth fragments scattered nearby. This was clearly human remains.

He turned to Yao Yuzhong, conveying a silent meaning.

The latter nodded, "It should be those porters. When I came last time, they should have appeared here as well. There are more further ahead."

Qi Yun signaled Eagle, who immediately crouched down to inspect the pile of bones.

Perhaps due to the long age, the bones had lost their toughness, and upon a gentle touch, fine bone particles fell away.

Eagle carefully examined the skull and limb bones, eventually shaking his head at Qi Yun, not finding anything useful.

The group continued forward, just as Yao Yuzhong had said, more skeletal remains appeared on the ground, with one area densely packed with bones all over.

It seems the rumors were true; those five hundred porters almost all died here.

Even the veterans like An Zai, who had come from the battlefield, felt chills down their spines at this sight of so many bone piles.

"Ssss~"

"Sss~"

Just as everyone focused on the bones, a sudden rustling sound came from somewhere.

The sound was very faint, initially like the wind blowing through cracks, but quickly became dense.

The "Ssss~" "Sss~" sounds came from all directions, like countless strings vibrating simultaneously, carrying an eerie sensation sending shivers down one's spine.

"It's a snake swarm!" Yao Yuzhong's face changed drastically.

As soon as he spoke, the beam of the searchlight revealed slender figures emerging from the rock walls, the bone piles, and even the stalactites overhead.

They were all green, their scales shimmering with eerie light under the lamps, with forked tongues flicking, their cold eyes staring at everyone.

Regarding the snake swarm, Yao Yuzhong wasn't lying; there were indeed many snakes, densely packed, making one's scalp tingle!

"Damn, how are there so many!" Niu Da couldn't help but curse, his forehead sweaty.

Though he was tall and robust, he was most afraid of snakes and spiders...

The scene before their eyes was too eerie; the number of snakes far exceeded expectations, covering the rock walls and the ground, seemingly endless, like a moving green tide slowly approaching!

"Don't move! Don't provoke them!" Qin Sizhi cautioned, then did something unexpected by extending his right hand towards a snake in front.

A bizarre scene occurred.

The snake seemed to be afraid of something; initially tense, its body slowly relaxed, its arched back flattening out, and it even began to retreat.

The previously applied juices on the surface were effective!

These snakes really disliked this scent, moving further away when getting even slightly closer.

Seeing this, An Zai's finger moved away from the flamethrower trigger, while the others breathed a long sigh of relief.

Safe for now!

"They're just temporarily deterred by the smell. Use sulfur powder to clear the path, quickly get through here!" Qin Sizhi shouted.

Upon hearing, everyone immediately took out sulfur powder from their backpacks, opened the lids, and sprinkled it in the distance.

A yellow powder fell on the wet rocks, emitting a pungent odor, mixing with the previous floral scent to form an even more stimulating smell.

The previously retreating snake swarm moved away faster upon smelling the sulfur, evidently repelled by the odor.

"Hurry, keep up!" Qin Sizhi strode ahead, with everyone following closely behind.

Thus nervously moving under the gaze of the snake swarm for hundreds of meters, ahead no longer saw any snakes, and the originally moving snake swarm behind also stopped.

Seeing this situation, everyone slightly eased their vigilance.

"Are we safe?"

"No!" Qin Sizhi suddenly shouted, sniffing the air, his expression grave.

"What's wrong?" Qi Yun asked, approaching.

Qin Sizhi frowned and uttered two words: "Putrid!"

Upon his warning, Qi Yun sniffed the air, indeed detecting a strong putrid smell, mixed with the cave's damp musty scent, carried by the wind towards them.

Compared to the snake swarm, this smell was more pungent, indescribable, perhaps only a seasoned cowboy could understand.

"This smell is odd! There's a big one ahead!" Yao Yuzhong shouted.

Immediately, everyone's face changed!

"Wha... a big one? A big snake?" An Zai stammered.

But before Yao Yuzhong could respond, a sudden "boom!" echoed from the front, like a massive boulder collapsing.

"Rustle" came the sound.

Stalactites overhead kept falling and splashed countless water droplets.

The beam of the flashlights quickly swept forward, and right at the end of the passage, a dark shadow emerged amid the dust!

The shadow was truly a snake! A gigantic snake!

Its size was ten times thicker than the green snakes earlier, its waist like a barrel, covered with dark brown scales, reflecting a dim golden sheen.

The snake's head was as large as a basketball, with triangular head vaguely showing protruding bone spurs, a pair of scarlet eyes like two lanterns were locked on everyone, the forked tongue spreading a pungent putrid smell, almost making one dizzy.

"What... What the heck... Is this the Snake King?!" An Zai swallowed, struggling to speak.

The sight was overwhelmingly shocking, even Qi Ting nearly trembled.

Chapter 679: Qin Sizhi!

The end of the cave was shrouded in darkness, and everyone instinctively shifted the beams of their flashlights away, avoiding the gigantic creature ahead.

Whether it was fear that the glaring light would anger it, or the horror of the forked tongue under the beam, everyone wanted to escape from the depths of their hearts.

No one could have imagined that deep within this cave, there lay a colossal creature, larger than the giant anacondas of the Amazon Rainforest seen in documentaries.

After the giant snake suddenly emerged, it made no further moves, just coiling at the end of the tunnel, its massive body almost completely blocking the entrance.

Its scarlet eyes swiveled slowly, the forked tongue flickering every few seconds, its putrid smell spreading with each movement, causing a churning nausea.

Brother Quan, Niu Da, Eagle, and others slowly moved their steps, converging towards the spot where Qi Yun stood, blocking him.

At the same time, they already had their handguns gripped, safeties off.

But... could this 9-millimeter caliber bullet really harm the monster before them?

No one felt sure in their hearts.

"Retreat slowly!" Qi Yun commanded with a low shout, quickly making a decision.

This giant snake was clearly not easy to handle, and the wisest choice now was to retreat safely before it attacked.

Upon hearing this, everyone began to move backward slowly, trying not to make a sound, afraid of disturbing the creature.

Fortunately, the giant snake only fixed its gaze on them, perhaps not feeling too hungry now.

"Splash!"

Suddenly! A stalactite from the ceiling fell, splashing into the underground river.

It wasn't a significant noise, but in the quietness of the cave, it sounded like a thunderclap!

The giant snake's scarlet eyes suddenly shrank, its previously coiled body instantly tense, like a spring wound tight.

It let out a piercing hiss, the sound piercing through eardrums, the forked tongue flickering madly, and the stench reached an extreme intensity.

In the next second, its barrel-thick body lunged at the group with the force of a whirlwind!

"Run!"

Brother Quan shouted as he turned, pushing Qi Yun aside while emptying the magazine of his Type 92 directly at the snake's head!

He was joined in firing by Niu Da, Eagle, and others.

Except for Xiao Wu, who was protecting Qi Yun as they retreated, everyone began shooting.

"Bang bang bang!"

The dense gunfire erupted in the cave, bullets like raindrops aimed at the giant snake's head and body.

Yet, the dark brown scales were tougher than imagined, the bullets only making a "ding" sound upon impact, falling to the ground and leaving shallow marks on the scales.

"Can't penetrate! This shell is too hard!" Niu Da yelled as he changed the magazine, watching the unrelenting charge of the giant snake with reddened eyes.

The giant snake completely ignored the bullet attacks, its huge mouth opened wide, filled with the stench, heading straight for Qin Sizhi and his disciple!

"Swish!"

Amid darkness, two cold flashes streaked as Jin Bao, who had hardly spoken all along, moved.

Holding a short knife in each hand, he charged forward instead of retreating, heading directly at the giant snake's head!

His movements were alarmingly swift, leaping like a leopard, dodging the sweeping tail, and in the moment the giant mouth was about to close, he leapt up, stepping on the snake's rough scales, rushing towards its left eye!

Except for Qin Sizhi, everyone was stunned by Jin Bao's action, not expecting him to be so daring.

And his skills weren't bad either!

In midair, Jin Bao gripped his short knife tightly, using his falling momentum to fiercely stab towards the giant snake's left eye!

This thrust was both quick and vicious; Jin Bao was undoubtedly a master with knives.

Just as the knife tip was about to pierce the snake's eye socket, the snake suddenly swung its head.

"Clank!"

A crisp sound.

The short knife stabbed at the outer edge of the eye socket, halted by hard bone spines!

The clash between blade and bone spines sparked a series of sparks, and Jin Bao only felt a numbness in his hands, as the short knife snapped!

Jin Bao's balance was lost instantly, sending him falling to the ground.

A flash of ferocity glinted in the snake's eye as its massive head lowered, wide mouth ready to devour him whole!

At the critical moment, Qin Sizhi took action.

In his palm were three black long nails which, with a wrist flick, shot with the speed of a whizz at the snake's eye!

"Whoosh whoosh whoosh!"

The three long nails flew swiftly like projectiles, aimed straight for the scarlet eyes of the snake.

The snake reacted quickly, sensing danger, and shifted its head again to avoid the vulnerable spot.

"Ding ding ding!"

Sparks erupted from the snake's scales as the nails gave a crisp clatter, rebounded.

Still unable to pierce through.

Yet this brief obstruction gave Jin Bao a sliver of life.

He evaded the snake's gaping mouth in time, rolling upon landing to disperse the force.

But barely catching a breath, the snake struck again, its thick tail sweeping like a steel whip towards him.

There's no doubt that if this hit connected, his life would be in grave danger.

"Dodge!"

At the crucial moment, a shout exploded from behind!

An Zai and Da Pao appeared, holding flamethrowers, rushing forward, spewing fiery jets like dragons towards the giant snake!

The fire illuminated the cave brightly.

"Sizzle sizzle sizzle!"

The thousand-degree heat forced the snake back, emitting a shrill hiss, as the scales on its tail burned, curling and falling, revealing dark red flesh amid an acrid burnt smell.

The giant snake felt the pain, seemingly very afraid of the heat, and did not attack again.

Chapter 680: Qin Sizhi! (Part 2)

"Retreat!"

Seizing the opportunity, the group began to retreat again, with An Zai and Da Pao covering the rear, their flamethrowers continuously emitting flames to suppress the giant snake.

"Hiss!"

Just when the group thought they could safely retreat, the giant snake let out another cry.

In the next second, the swarm of snakes behind them went berserk!

They no longer feared the scent on the group, surging towards them en masse, green bodies sweeping in like a tide, forked tongues flickering, creating a "hiss-swish" sound that made one's scalp crawl.

"Not good! The snake swarm has been summoned!"

Everyone's expressions changed drastically; in front lurked the giant snake menacingly, and behind, the frenzied snake swarm charged at them, instantly throwing them into a pincer attack.

"Sulfur powder!"

Qi Yun shouted to remind everyone, and they began scattering sulfur powder around them.

However, the result was minimal; the snake swarm slowed down slightly but continued to slither towards them.

Sulfur powder was useless!

Seeing this, Da Pao quickly pulled back, aimed the flamethrower at the snake swarm, and the fire spewed out, making the frenzied snake swarm stop advancing under the scorching heat.

The air was filled with the smell of burnt snake flesh and sulfur, pungent and revolting.

"The fuel won't last long!" Da Pao roared, his finger gripping the trigger tightly, the intensity of the flames visibly weakening.

Once the fuel ran out, the snake swarm would immediately engulf them.

The consequences, just thinking about it, were enough to make one's scalp crawl.

Qi Yun forced himself to stay calm, quickly pondering a strategy in his mind.

But despairingly, he realized they seemed to be at a dead end, even the dark river beside them was teeming with snakes.

"Old Yao! Are you still gonna slack off?"

Yao Yuzhong was already sweating profusely in anxiety, yelling in explanation, "I can't do anything! The book didn't mention this big guy!"

"Damn it!"

Qi Yun cursed angrily, turning his gaze to the giant snake.

"We have to kill it! Otherwise, we'll all damn die here today!"

Just as the words fell, Xiao Wu suddenly stepped forward, picking up a fallen short knife from the ground.

"I'll do it!"

Xiao Wu's voice carried a resolute tone, without unnecessary words, and he charged at the giant snake wielding the knife.

His steps were swift, facing the sweeping tail of the giant snake, he was not flustered at all, suddenly ducking low, sliding half a meter along the ground like a gust of wind.

The massive snake tail crashed into where he had been standing seconds ago, sending debris flying. Xiao Wu used the momentum to flip over and stand, the short knife in hand glinting with a cold light as he stabbed towards the burnt spot on the giant snake's tail.

With a crisp "ding", the broken blade wedged between the scales, and Xiao Wu exerted force with his wrist, the blade piercing into the snake's body, instantly causing black-red blood to seep out along the blade.

The giant snake writhed in pain, its enormous body suddenly arched, blood-red mouth snapping towards Xiao Wu's head, the foul stench almost making one faint.

Xiao Wu had already anticipated this, his left hand slapped the snake's body, using the counterforce to leap backwards, narrowly evading the giant snake's foul maw, landing while pulling out the short knife, spraying a trail of blood.

Seeing this, Qin Sizhi shouted, "Jin Bao!"

The latter understood, also picking up another broken knife from the ground to join the fight.

"You guys keep it occupied from the front!"

Qin Sizhi seemed to have a plan, taking advantage of the giant snake's engagement with Xiao Wu to roll to its rear.

Eagle also drew a military knife, preparing to help, but was stopped by Brother Quan.

Unlike Xiao Wu and Jin Bao, they practiced Military Boxing—a simple and practical style focusing on honing physical strength and explosive power, emphasizing a quick and decisive strike.

In contrast, these two were trained in Inner Strength techniques, with extremely agile movements and style, more suitable for entanglements with the giant snake.

Rushing in to help would not only be futile but might even be a hindrance.

"Wait for the chance to shoot its eyes!"

Thus, with Xiao Wu and Jin Bao keeping the snake occupied from the front, Brother Quan and others occasionally fired shots, while Qin Sizhi stayed hidden behind the giant snake constantly observing.

The giant snake's attention was entirely fixed on Xiao Wu and Jin Bao, its crimson eyes locked onto the two, thick tail constantly sweeping, blood-red mouth biting repeatedly but always narrowly evaded by the two.

Xiao Wu's short knife flashed with cold light, targeting the giant snake's eyes and nostrils, each strike swift as lightning, though not causing lethal damage, still frustrating the snake, its hissing becoming increasingly urgent.

Jin Bao was slightly slower, but still helped in occupying the snake.

Whenever the giant snake raised its head to hiss or turned to attack, Brother Quan would decisively pull the trigger, creating opportunities for Xiao Wu and Jin Bao to breathe.

Gradually, with the team's coordination, the giant snake's speed seemed to slow down. Such a massive body, every twist exhausted a lot of energy.

Signs of fatigue were already showing.

At this moment, Qin Sizhi moved!

He leapt up with agility, like a wisp of willow, and jumped onto the giant snake's back in the blink of an eye.

These two moves were hardly like those of a sixty-year-old man, more agile than basketball players.

In the blink of an eye!

Before the giant snake could react, Qin Sizhi's right hand shot out like lightning, piercing straight at the snake's neck!

That was the snake's vulnerable spot, the second weakest part after the eyes.

Qin Sizhi had been observing, waiting for the snake to slow down, waiting for this moment of opportunity.

"Hey!"

He shouted, his four-fingered right hand stabbing into the snake's scales like a sharp steel awl. Though not as hard as the back, the scales held their toughness.

Without hesitation, Qin Sizhi unleashed his inner strength, thrusting all four fingers deep into the snake's flesh, and then forcefully pulled out!

"Squelch!"

Black-red blood sprayed out as he wrenched a tendon from the snake's body!

This scene stunned everyone.

Bullets couldn't even pierce those scales, yet Qin Sizhi's right hand had.

Was this what Old Yao called his masterstroke?

Golden Right Hand? Or Iron Sand Palm?

"Hiss!"

The snake let out an ear-splitting scream, sharp enough to pierce eardrums.

Its massive body froze for an instant, then began to thrash violently.

Protruding rocks shattered on impact, debris raining down like a storm.

Seizing the opportunity, Qin Sizhi kicked off, leaping away three meters to solid ground, clutching a piece of flesh that resembled a large intestine.

The snake thrashed frantically like a headless fly, its thick tail thrashing about, stalactites crashing down chaotically.

Its movements slowed, its cries weakened, clearly losing vitality rapidly.

Taking advantage of this, Xiao Wu suddenly struck. With a short knife, he stabbed the snake's eye socket and twisted hard, leaving the snake motionless.

Almost simultaneously, the flamethrowers in An Zai and Da Pao's hands extinguished, fuel depleted.

But the snake cluster seemed to sense the giant snake's death, no longer frenzied as before, retreating into darkness, leaving behind wet traces and a pungent stench.

"Damn!"

"Damn it... Finally done..."

An Zai tossed his flamethrower aside, collapsing to the ground, gasping heavily.

Having just escaped from the brink of death, everyone's nerves finally relaxed.

Qi Yun stepped forward, helping Qin Sizhi up from the ground, his face showing genuine admiration:
"Master Qin, impressive!"

Qin Sizhi shook his head with a wry smile, swaying as he stood, clearly having expended much of his inner strength.

"Just lucky, getting old... twenty years ago... cough..."

Before finishing, he began to cough violently.

"Master!" Jin Bao hurried over to tend to him.

"I'm fine, just need to recover slowly." Qin Sizhi waved his hand, then looked at Qi Yun, "Mr. Qi, I have an unreasonable request."

Qi Yun smiled, "Master Qin, speak freely."

Qin Sizhi glanced at the giant snake, hesitating slightly: "This creature has lived who knows how long, its snake gall likely has extraordinary effects. I wish to use it to brew a pot of medicinal wine..."

Qi Yun understood and did not refuse, turning to the others: "Brother Quan, help Master Qin retrieve the snake gall!"

Qin Sizhi was grateful for Qi Yun's readiness, bowing in thanks: "Thank you, Mr. Qi!"

Qi Yun helped him up with a smile: "Master Qin, no need for that, earlier it was your bravery that subdued it, if anything, you saved us."

He spoke from the heart, knowing that without Qin Sizhi's show of prowess, they might not have survived.

While they spoke, Eagle suddenly walked swiftly over, anxiously saying: "Boss, that thing is gone!"