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Chapter 148 The Hidden Tricks in the Antique Trade

"Uncle De, are you... are you telling the truth?"

Zhuang Rui stared at Uncle De with an incredulous expression. Uncle De's words had deeply shaken him.

Out of sheer curiosity, Zhuang Rui pressed Uncle De about what kind of shady things might happen in the pawnshop. After all, he had worked there for over a year, and although he didn't pay much attention to the pawnshop's business, he hadn't seen anything unacceptable. Uncle De's words had only piqued his curiosity.

Pressed by Zhuang Rui, Uncle De finally revealed that even in various pawnshops, pawnbrokers sometimes make mistakes. After all, the methods of counterfeiting cultural relics are becoming increasingly sophisticated, and many relics are even made to look more real than genuine articles, making it difficult to distinguish between them. It's really not fair to blame these appraisers for their lack of skill. If they didn't use instruments for authentication, even some master-level appraisal experts would probably be fooled.

Logically, pawnshops should seal or destroy these fake items after receiving them. However, they often spend a considerable amount of money to purchase these items, and the losses would be substantial if they were disposed of through proper channels. Therefore, some pawnshops collude with auction houses to auction off these fake antiques, issuing pawnbroker's dead pawn documents, which are then used by the auction houses to hype up the items, passing them off as genuine, and deceiving some antique enthusiasts or ordinary collectors who are not very knowledgeable about antiques.

Because most people have a desire to get a bargain, the combination of a pawnshop's guaranteed pawn certificate, the auction house's promotional posters and brochures, and the relatively low starting price makes many people flock to these auctions. These kinds of items are often the easiest to sell. However, those buyers who think they have found a treasure are actually buying fakes.

In recent years, some newly wealthy private business owners have begun to invest in the antique business. Some spend lavishly, focusing on "top-tier" national treasures, while others demand exorbitant prices, trying to "buy everything" right away. Some even believe in "treasure hunting" overseas. These wealthy individuals are the targets of pawnshops and auction houses that prey on them.

"Why would an old man like me lie to you? But you only need to know about this. Don't spread it around. It's easy to offend people. Although it's said that every family has its rules and every profession has its regulations, these days not many people care about these things. If you spread it around and ruin someone's livelihood, someone might come after you."

Seeing Zhuang Rui's indignant expression, Uncle De quickly and solemnly warned him. This kind of matter involves a wide range of people, even some large multinational auction houses, whose power is immense and cannot be shaken by just one or two individuals. He was afraid that Zhuang Rui might act impulsively and expose the matter, making it impossible for him to maintain his position in this industry afterward.

Even Uncle De himself, sometimes under certain pressure, would take out a few eye-catching items and hand them over to the auction house for auction. However, this pawn shop had only been established for a short time, and such things had only happened once or twice. But this was one of the reasons why Uncle De decided to step down as manager.

"Uncle De, these wealthy people are all elites, they won't be so easily fooled, right? Wouldn't they have someone authenticate it?"

Zhuang Rui was somewhat puzzled. It was understandable to buy fake items from shops and street stalls, but when it came to buying antiques for tens of thousands or even millions of yuan, the buyers would definitely be very cautious. It shouldn't be an easy task for pawnshops and auction houses to fool these people.

Putting aside others, Zhuang Rui knew that Fatty Ma from Shanxi, who always brought a professional appraiser with him when he went to various auctions. However, at the grassland auction in Tibet, Fatty Ma was on vacation, so he didn't have an appraiser with him.

Uncle De smiled wryly upon hearing this and said, "Xiao Zhuang, many things are not as simple as you think. For example, even I can't tell the difference between real and fake items in a short time. Do you expect other appraisers to be able to identify them in the short auction process? Many buyers keep the items they won at home for years and still don't know that the items are fake."

Let me give you another example. There are probably four or five thousand people in Zhejiang Province who are "playing around" in the jade and antique trade, but there are only a few dozen real experts.

Most of them are folk enthusiasts, and some are people who have succeeded in other businesses and have switched to jade and antiques to "play around".

Some people in the industry, seeing the wealth and vanity of these bosses, deliberately set traps for them. As the saying goes, "Gold has a price, but jade is priceless." Many people believe jade is priceless and that boasting will inflate its value. However, like gold and silver, jade has a price, and in the eyes of experts, the valuation is generally not significantly different.

As Uncle De spoke, he unfastened a white jade Pixiu ornament from his waist and handed it to Zhuang Rui. He continued, "This is a piece of Hetian jade that I bought myself and had it processed. I estimate it's worth around 15,000 yuan. A few days ago, someone offered me 22,000 yuan, but I didn't sell. It's quite exquisite; it's good for keeping as a souvenir."

Xiao Zhuang, the 20,000 I mentioned is just the price within the industry. If you take it to the market and sell it in a large shopping mall or jewelry store, such a pendant would be worth at least 100,000. That's the difference between insiders and outsiders. Some bosses like to haggle over prices when buying jewelry and jade in shopping malls, thinking they've gotten a great deal, but little do they know that they've made themselves a laughing stock in the industry.

Let me tell you a true story that happened around the time of the Lunar New Year. There was a wealthy businessman in Zhejiang who had also fallen in love with collecting antiques. Before the New Year, he spent 100,000 yuan to invite a jade appraisal expert from Beijing. I know that person. The businessman asked the expert to go to great lengths to collect jade artifacts from home and abroad for appraisal. After looking at them, the expert declined, saying that it would take at least half a year to identify ancient jade and that it was not easy to draw a conclusion in a short time. He then hurriedly said goodbye and left.

After the New Year, the shop owner called me in to take a look. You know, of those dozens of so-called most valuable antique jade pieces, not a single one was from before the Song Dynasty. A few were from the Ming and Qing Dynasties, which were already quite good. Most were imitations. Of course, the jade itself was genuine, but the value of new jade restored using antique techniques was vastly different."

Zhuang Rui was stunned by Uncle De's words. He didn't realize there were so many traps in this business. However, he was still puzzled and asked, "Uncle De, if these people who buy antiques or, as you said, jade, find fake items at auctions, will they just let it go? These people aren't ordinary folks who can be bullied. Won't they seek revenge?"

Uncle De chuckled, getting a bit thirsty from talking. He poured himself a cup of tea and drank it before saying, "Xiao Zhuang, you're still too green. Do you think those who make a living from this industry wouldn't think of these things? The auction house invoice only says 'crafts,' which is completely different from the advertising on the GG posters and brochures. Even if you suffer a loss and go to court, it won't do you any good."

Those big bosses who collect antiques and jade may be business geniuses, top performers in their respective fields. However, different industries are like different worlds; success in one industry does not guarantee success in another. Moreover, appreciating jade and antiques requires years of dedicated practice, like "starting from childhood" or "Tai Chi." Even I, an old man, have been involved in this field my whole life and have made my fair share of mistakes. How much more so for those bosses who think they are experts after reading a few books?

Uncle De's words made Zhuang Rui blush a little. He was the kind of person who had read a few books and thought he was quite good at it. However, Zhuang Rui was different from those bosses. At least, if they wanted him to make a mistake and pay tuition, those counterfeiters would probably have to make the fake antiques look magical.

"Alright, let's go to the meeting room. It's about time. We need to have a meeting today to finalize your appointment."

After Uncle De finished speaking, he stood up, took the jade Pixiu handed to him by Zhuang Rui, and hung it on his waist. Zhuang Rui, with his sharp eyes, noticed that Uncle De also had three or four other jade items hanging on his waist. He looked like a jade seller.

Uncle De walked to the door, then suddenly remembered something and turned to Zhuang Rui, saying, "Xu Ling is a bit playful. She's currently on probation. If you don't think she's good enough, you can fire her. But she's been doing well lately, so let's not take it personally."

Zhuang Rui nodded, finally understanding why Xu Ling had been so respectful to him when he entered the pawnshop that morning. It turned out that whether or not he allowed her to stay was entirely up to him. However, Zhuang Rui was too lazy to argue with her. Encountering robbers was a natural disaster or a man-made one. Besides, without this incident, he probably wouldn't have gained supernatural abilities from his eyes.

The pawnshop's meeting room was actually a converted office. It wasn't very big, with a round table that could seat seven or eight people. At this moment, only Xu Ling, Lai Jingdong, and the salesperson

from the forfeiture section were sitting around the round table. As for Wang Yiding, he was nowhere to be seen. Uncle De couldn't help but frown. He had personally called to notify him, yet he was even later than him.

"Xiao Lai, what about Wang Yiding?"

"Uncle De, a client just came in. He has a few pieces of jewelry that he wants Wang to appraise. He's in his office right now and might be a little late." Lai Jingdong's attitude towards Uncle De was much better than before, but he only nodded slightly when he saw Zhuang Rui, looking indifferent.

Hearing that Wang was receiving clients, Uncle De's expression softened. He asked Zhuang Rui to sit at the head of the table, then looked around at the group and said, "Today I am announcing an appointment. After deliberation by the leaders of the investment company, we have decided to appoint Comrade Zhuang Rui as the manager of the pawnshop, responsible for all daily administrative affairs. If you have any questions in the future, just come to Manager Zhuang. I also hope that you will support Manager Zhuang's work in the same way you supported mine."

After Uncle De finished speaking, Lai Jingdong's smiling face slowly stiffened. Within the pawnshop, only Uncle De and Xu Ling knew a little about Zhuang Rui taking over as manager, while Lai Jingdong and Wang Yiding were completely unaware of this matter.

In Lai Jingdong's eyes, Zhuang Rui was just a recent graduate with no experience or background. Neither of them considered him a competitor. They did know that Uncle De would be stepping down as manager after a while, so they treated Uncle De with great respect, hoping that he could put in a good word for them with the leaders of the investment company and give them some credit.

But unexpectedly, Zhuang Rui, who was injured in the robbery before the New Year, became his boss on his first day of work today. Lai Jingdong, who had been fighting with Wang Yiding for half a year, was completely unable to accept this fact.

"Uncle De, shouldn't the investment company have some kind of official document to issue for something like this?"

Lai Jingdong asked somewhat unwillingly, knowing that Uncle De and Zhuang Rui had a good relationship, and it was hard to say whether this was Uncle De's own decision.

"Of course there is. Manager Zhuang's appointment document has been issued for over a month, but he has been recovering from his injury, so I haven't announced it yet. Everyone, please take a look."

Uncle De took out an official document from his bag. The document clearly stated at the top: Comrade Zhuang Rui is appointed as the manager of the pawnshop. After Lai Jingdong took it, his face turned ashen.

"Let me say a few words. We all know each other, so there's no need for introductions. I'll now explain the work arrangements for the pawnshop going forward. Xu Ling will continue to be in charge of the cashier's work, and she'll be responsible for handling the handover of money and valuables with the bank every day. Xiao Xie will still be in charge of the forfeited pawn section. As for Appraiser Lai..."

Zhuang Rui paused here, waking Lai Jingdong from his daze. After seeing the document, Lai Jingdong understood that unless he resigned, he would have to be under Zhuang Rui's leadership. Hearing Zhuang Rui mention his name, he couldn't help but look at Zhuang Rui, and at the same time, he secretly made up his mind that if Zhuang Rui touched his professional field, he would immediately submit his resignation.

"As for Appraiser Lai, his professional knowledge is well-known in the industry. Here's what we'll do: in the future, for auctions of forfeited items related to luxury goods and foreign art, you and Appraiser Wang will handle the negotiations with the auction houses. I won't interfere with the specifics, and I will also suggest to the investment company that you be given full authority."

Zhuang Rui's words completely stunned Lai Jingdong, who was already feeling hopeless. He and Wang Yi had been vying for the manager position for more than half a year, partly for the investment funds and partly for the authority to establish a cooperative relationship with the auction house. There were many shady dealings involved, and if handled well, earning one or two million a year wouldn't be a big problem.

Previously, Uncle De held this power tightly in his hands. Lai Jingdong thought that after Zhuang Rui became the manager, he would definitely also firmly grasp this power. However, he did not expect that at the beginning of his tenure, he would actually delegate the right to communicate with the auction house to the two of them and formally report to the investment company. This made Lai Jingdong feel like he was dreaming.