

## Golden 301

### Chapter 301 Black Pottery

The street vendor was busy trying to make some extra money and completely ignored Zhuang Rui. Firstly, his wares were mostly cheap trinkets, and secondly, Zhuang Rui was Chinese, but judging from his accent, he wasn't from Beijing. Out-of-town tourists like him rarely spend much, making him difficult to swindle.

After Zhuang Rui took the jar in his hands, he examined it carefully. It was a pottery vessel with a large belly and a narrow mouth, about thirty centimeters high. It was completely black and smooth, without any decorations. It looked a bit like a small jar used for pickling vegetables in the countryside.

However, Zhuang Rui was delighted as soon as he picked up the object. Although it was quite large, it was extremely light. Such a big jar only weighed one or two pounds. He reached inside the jar and felt that it was very smooth and not at all difficult to handle. This confirmed Zhuang Rui's guess.

"Zhuang Rui, why did you buy this piece of junk? To pickle vegetables at home? Hmm, it's so light? It's not made of sheet metal, is it?"

Seeing Zhuang Rui looking at the jar from all angles, Miao Feifei reached out, grabbed the jar by the mouth, and knocked on it. The jar made a clanging, metallic sound, which didn't seem like porcelain.

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"Hey, young lady, you're wrong. Why would I put up a tin can for no reason? Let me tell you, this is black pottery from the late Neolithic period, a living antique..."

The stall owner, who was arguing with the foreigners, turned around and said with dissatisfaction after hearing Miao Feifei's words. Then he picked up a bronze artifact and said, "The items on my stall are all good things. My friend, I can tell you're an expert. Look at this bronze artifact. It's a candlestick used by nobles to light lamps during the Western Zhou Dynasty. It's a genuine and fine piece."

Zhuang Rui smiled, took the pottery jar from Miao Feifei's hand and placed it on the ground, then took the bronze candlestick and said, "Is this from the Western Zhou Dynasty?"

This candlestick is about half a meter tall, with a four-legged stand at the bottom. On top is a small lotus-shaped bowl supported by a lotus leaf, presumably for holding candles or lamp oil. The entire candlestick has some engravings and is covered in green verdigris, making it look like a genuine antique.

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Zhuang Rui took the hand, glanced at it, and hurriedly threw it back, as if his hands were stained with something dirty.

"Hey, I'm telling you, even if you don't want it, don't throw it away! This item is very valuable, it's definitely from the Western Zhou Dynasty, at most the Eastern Zhou Dynasty..." The stall owner was a little dissatisfied with Zhuang Rui's actions, carefully placed the candlestick in front of him, and turned his face away to chat with the foreigners again.

"Zhuang Rui, that thing looks really old. It might really be from the Zhou Dynasty."

Miao Feifei was about to take a look when Zhuang Rui threw it back at her.

Zhuang Rui looked at Miao Feifei with a strange expression and said, "Western Zhou Dynasty, you actually believe him when he says it's the age of dinosaurs? Don't be silly, last week's was more like it..."

"Those patinas didn't form in a day or two..." Miao Feifei was a little skeptical of Zhuang Rui's words.

"Miss, I have dozens of ways to make that kind of patina. Who knows if his stuff was fermented in a latrine?"

As Zhuang Rui spoke, he rinsed his right hand with the mineral water in his hand. Although he was not a germaphobe, he felt somewhat disgusted by this kind of aged-up technique.

Miao Feifei was completely dumbfounded, staring blankly at her own hands. It was as if she had touched countless items in Panjiayuan over the years. Hearing Zhuang Rui say this, she felt like she wanted to die.

Seeing Miao Feifei's expression, Zhuang Rui laughed and said, "It's okay. It's not all about using the method I mentioned to make it look old. Burying it in the ground for a month or two can also achieve the same effect."

"Disgusting! Stop talking, let's go." Miao Feifei angrily punched Zhuang Rui and grabbed his arm, trying to squeeze out. [69shux.com](http://69shux.com)

"Hey, don't rush, I still have things to buy."

Zhuang Rui bent down and picked up the pottery jar that he had just placed at his feet. Others might not understand the value of this thing, but he knew it very well, especially after examining it with his spiritual energy, he was even more certain that it was an original antique.

Many people may not know that pottery is not a unique invention of China. Archaeological discoveries have proven that many countries and regions around the world have successively invented pottery making. However, China took a big step forward on the basis of pottery making... and invented porcelain first, writing a glorious page in the history of human civilization.

Although porcelain and pottery are two different materials, there is a close connection between them. Without the invention of pottery and the experience gained from the continuous improvement of pottery-making techniques, porcelain could not have been invented independently.

The main differences between the two are as follows: First, the firing temperatures are different. Pottery is generally fired at a lower temperature than porcelain, with a maximum of no more than 1100°C. Porcelain, on the other hand, is fired at a higher temperature, mostly above 1200°C, and some even reach around 1400°C.

Secondly, they differ in hardness. Pottery is fired at a lower temperature, so the body is not fully sintered, resulting in a dull sound when struck. The body is also less hard, and some pieces can even be scratched with a steel knife. Porcelain, on the other hand, is fired at a higher temperature, so the body is mostly sintered. It produces a crisp sound when struck, and it is difficult to scratch the surface with a regular steel knife.

Thirdly, the raw materials used are also different. Pottery can be made and fired using ordinary clay, while porcelain requires the selection of specific materials, such as kaolin.

Furthermore, their transparency and glaze color are also different, and the two are quite different. However, there is no doubt that pottery predates porcelain.

Some friends might say, "Didn't you say that the earlier an antique is, the more valuable it is?" That's true and not true. Although pottery appeared early, it was relatively simple to fire, and the materials and workmanship were very rough. Ordinary pottery, even those unearthed from the Neolithic period, are not very valuable. Pottery jars from the Han Dynasty, for example, are so rare that no one wants them even if they are displayed.

However, everything has two sides. There are valuable pieces of pottery, such as red pottery and painted pottery from the Yangshao culture period, black pottery from the Longshan culture period, white pottery from the late Shang dynasty, and glazed pottery from the Han dynasty. Many of these are exquisite pieces with great collection value, but the number that has survived is extremely small. Therefore, pottery collectors are a relatively small group in the antique trade.

When it comes to antiques, if no one is interested, the price will naturally not go up. This is the current situation for pottery. Apart from genuine and rare pieces, the rest are basically ignored.

Zhuang Rui was lucky. The piece he was holding was indeed black pottery, just as the stall owner had said. However, it wasn't from the Neolithic period, but rather a genuine black pottery from the Longshan Culture period. Zhuang Rui had just vigorously rubbed the inside of the black pottery with his hand, and the thin clay walls immediately became shiny black. Moreover, the pottery was extremely thin, somewhat like eggshell porcelain, all of which are characteristics of fine Longshan black pottery.

Of course, Zhuang Rui had also examined it with his spiritual energy. If it weren't for the large amount of purple gas inside the pottery jar, Zhuang Rui wouldn't have been so certain. After all, this kind of item is extremely rare, and he never expected to come across it at this stall full of counterfeit goods.

Black pottery is unglazed, so it looks dull and lackluster without being wiped, which is probably one of the main reasons why this object is covered in dust. Of course, for Zhuang Rui, this is a good opportunity to find a bargain. If everyone else has figured it out, what can he expect to find a bargain?

The stall owner finally managed to communicate with the foreigner and the Kangxi blue-and-white landscape and figure covered jar was sold for 2,800 yuan. The stall owner took out a very exquisite box,

put the covered jar in it, handed it to the foreigner, counted the money, and that was it, the matter was settled.

The foreigner was smug about his purchase, unaware that the smiling stall owner was secretly cursing him as an idiot. He bought the item for two or three hundred yuan and made ten times the profit, which put the young reseller in a great mood. "Brother, I'm all about talking," he thought.

"Boss, how much do you sell this for?" Zhuang Rui asked when he saw that the stall owner had some free time.

"Hey bro, you're still fiddling with this thing? If you like it, just take it. I'll give you a discount."

The stall owner was in a good mood. Although he hadn't earned any US dollars, he had already pocketed RMB. He glanced at the pottery jar and said, "This thing is much older than that Kangxi blue and white covered jar. But we're all on the same side, so I'll give you a discount. Three thousand yuan, how about that?"

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui immediately looked angry and said loudly in Pengcheng dialect, "Who are you trying to fool? It's one thing to fool foreigners, but you think you can fool me? I just think this thing is tacky. If I buy it and put it in the house, it will make me look cultured, right? Boss, you're not being fair. I don't want it."

As soon as Zhuang Rui finished speaking, a wave of disdainful glances swept over him. Cultured people have always prided themselves on being refined, and collectors are even more particular about elegance. They enjoy leisure and cultivate their character. Although these things are meant to be shown off, the meaning can only be understood but not spoken. Someone like Zhuang Rui can be summed up in one word: vulgar.

"Hey, I said, don't go! Name your price..."

Seeing that Zhuang Rui was about to leave, the stall owner became anxious. He wasn't actually from Beijing; he just rented a stall here and only set up shop for one week a month. The rest of the time, he would travel to various places to collect these kinds of things. Of course, he usually went to places where antique replicas were concentrated, but he would also collect items that looked a bit old. This

pottery jar was something he bought from the countryside for five yuan. It seemed to be something that a family used to give their dog water.

"I'll take it for two hundred yuan..."

Zhuang Rui really went all out on the price, cutting it down by a zero.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, the stall owner feigned deep regret and said, "Brother, I spent eight hundred to buy this, and you want to take it for two hundred? I'll give you a fair price, one thousand yuan. Take it or leave it..."

Chapter 302 As Black as Lacquer, As Thin as Paper (Part 1)

The stall owner, a shrewd businessman, knew he couldn't back down and offered his lowest price of 1,000 yuan. However, he didn't see the smile that crept onto Zhuang Rui's lips as he turned back.

"Boss, this thousand dollars you mentioned, it's not in US dollars, is it?"

Zhuang Rui deliberately put on an innocent look and asked, which drew laughter from the surrounding crowd. The onlookers thought that Zhuang Rui was teasing the stall owner, because the dark thing did not look like a valuable item, and the price had been reduced from three thousand to one thousand, which was a two-thirds reduction, indicating that the owner did not think much of the item.

"Hey buddy, do you have any US dollars? 1000 RMB, take the money or don't cause trouble..."

The stall owner's expression turned somewhat unpleasant. Although everyone knew that the things sold here were fake, they couldn't just say it on their faces. Zhuang Rui's question just now was a bit of a dig at him.

"I didn't say I didn't want it. I just wanted to make sure before I bought it, so you wouldn't say it's in US dollars later..."

Zhuang Rui took out his wallet from his jeans pocket, counted out 1,000 yuan and handed it over. He usually carried 40,000 to 50,000 yuan in cash in his bag, but it was too hot to carry his bag, so he only

put 2,000 yuan in his wallet. If the stall owner asked for 3,000 yuan, he really wouldn't be able to come up with the money right away, and besides, the stall didn't accept credit cards.

After taking the money, the stall owner smiled so broadly that his skin creased together like a chrysanthemum. He quickly took out a cardboard box, which, of course, wasn't as well-packaged as the Qing Dynasty Kangxi jar. He put the ceramic jar into the box, stuffed some foam or similar filler in the middle, tied a knot in a rope, and then handed it to Zhuang Rui.

"Hey boss, would you like something else? All the items here are genuine..."

"Thanks, next time I renovate my house, I'll come back and buy some things from you to make a good impression."

Zhuang Rui's words once again drew scornful glances, especially seeing such a graceful and charming woman like Miao Feifei beside him. This made many who considered themselves more handsome and wealthier than Zhuang Rui feel as if they had sand in their eyes.

After walking around the corner and then another thirty or forty meters until the stall was out of sight, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but burst into laughter, drawing stares from those around him. They quickly distanced themselves from him, thinking, "These days, there are all sorts of people. Maybe he escaped from a mental hospital and is scratching himself when he has an episode."

"Zhuang Rui, stop grinning like an idiot! What is that thing you bought that's making you so happy?"

Miao Feifei stood in front of Zhuang Rui and was also admired as a rare animal. She quickly pulled Zhuang Rui and squeezed into the crowd.

"Hey, slow down, don't crush this thing."

Zhuang Rui hugged the box tightly with both hands. This item was very valuable. He never expected to make such a purchase during his trip to Panjiayuan. It was definitely worth the trip.

When the two reached the entrance of a shop and were no longer crowded, Zhuang Rui spoke up: "This is called black pottery. It dates back to the late Neolithic period of the Longkou culture in Shandong. The craftsmanship of black pottery is more sophisticated, refined, delicate, and unique than that of primitive painted pottery. As early as about 2,000 years before the invention of porcelain, Chinese black pottery had already reached a level of craftsmanship comparable to porcelain. This thing is much more valuable than the chicken cup we saw in Zhonghai."

Black pottery remained relatively unknown throughout history until 1936, when Liang Qichao's son, Liang Siyong, led an archaeological team to discover a rare pottery piece dating back more than 4,500 years at the Liangcheng cultural site in Rizhao, Shandong Province. The piece was a high-stemmed, openwork eggshell pottery cup, unglazed yet glossy black, with a thin body and a hard texture. Its walls were no more than 1 millimeter thick at their thickest point and only 2 millimeters at their thinnest point, weighing only 22 grams. Its exquisite craftsmanship is considered a world-class marvel.

Thus, black pottery became a typical representative of the Longshan culture, also known as "standard black pottery," embodying a simple and unadorned ultimate beauty. It possesses extremely high artistry and occupies an important place in the history of Chinese arts and crafts, hailed by the world archaeological community as "the most exquisite creation of Earth's civilization four thousand years ago." 08SH.

The black pottery jar that Zhuang Rui found is naturally not as exquisite as the eggshell pottery cup, but it is still extremely rare. Black pottery is not uncommon, but fine examples with thin walls are very rare. Perhaps the jar in Zhuang Rui's hand is a unique piece, in which case its price would be immeasurable.

"Zhuang Rui, how much can this jar sell for?"

Miao Feifei wasn't particularly interested in the origin of this thing; she just wanted to know how much something Zhuang Rui had bought for 1000 yuan was actually worth.

Zhuang Rui glanced around, deliberately adopting a mysterious air, and said, "If you sell it within the trade or trade it with someone, it should fetch over 2 million. However, if you take it to an auction house, it'll be at least 3 million. The exact price is hard to say..."

"Three million? My God, you bought it for 1,000 yuan, Zhuang Rui. I'm only now realizing how ruthless you are."

Miao Feifei was shocked by the price. Although she came from a good family and had never lacked money, it was not money she earned herself. She had never thought that money could be earned so easily. This caused some confusion in Officer Miao's mind, and Zhuang Rui's image in her mind was elevated to an unprecedented level.

Actually, Zhuang Rui's price was already an understatement. In recent years, more and more people have been collecting fine pottery, especially black pottery, white pottery, and painted pottery. Their prices have skyrocketed in recent years, rivaling some official kiln porcelains from the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, these kinds of fine collectibles are relatively rare, so they are auctioned very infrequently, and therefore the public has little knowledge of them.

However, within the pottery enthusiast community, there is naturally a group of people who pay attention to this piece. If Zhuang Rui's black pottery work were put up for auction, with just a little prior publicity, the starting bid would likely be over four million.

"Hey buddy, is that really Longshan black pottery in your box?"

Zhuang Rui and Miao Feifei were startled by a voice that suddenly rang out beside them. Looking in the direction of the voice, they saw a thin old man in his sixties wearing a long, one-piece robe and cloth shoes. He looked a bit like the head manager of a pawnshop before the liberation.

"Does this have anything to do with you?"

Officer Miao's phoenix eyes widened. The old man's appearance was somewhat sleazy, and Miss Miao had never been fond of anything or anyone that was not beautiful.

"It's alright, it's not a problem at all. But could this young man broaden my horizons a bit?"

The old man turned his face toward Zhuang Rui. He could tell that the item belonged to Zhuang Rui, and therefore it was Zhuang Rui's responsibility to make the decision.

"I'm sorry, I was just saying it casually, it might not be true, so let's skip it." This place is a bit messy, and Zhuang Rui doesn't want to show this item to anyone. He had already decided that once the courtyard house is renovated, this thing will definitely be the first thing to move in.

Seeing Zhuang Rui about to leave, the old man quickly pointed to the shop in front of him and said, "Hey, young man, don't be in such a hurry. I'm not a bad person. Look, this is the shop I own. Let's go in and sit down. We can learn about Longshan black pottery from each other..."

Zhuang Rui looked up and saw that the shop was quite large, with the signboard bearing the three big characters "Ci Lai Fang" (Porcelain Shop). There were many people coming and going. He was a bit tired from shopping and thought it would be a good time to sit down and rest. So he nodded and said, "Alright, then I'll ask for your guidance..."

Miao Feifei was initially reluctant, but seeing Zhuang Rui go in, she reluctantly followed him in.

This antique shop specializes in ceramics. Various ceramic items are displayed on wooden shelves of all sizes. Zhuang Rui glanced at them and estimated that there should be no fewer than a thousand ceramic pieces. However, there was another counter in the shop with a row of wooden shelves behind it. Presumably, the items on that counter were the old, heirloom pieces.

The old man walking in front was surnamed Na. He could be considered a second-generation descendant of the Eight Banners of the Qing Dynasty. His family had many old things when he was young, but his father, who only knew how to eat, drink, gamble, and smoke opium, had squandered them all.

However, Xiao Na was quite ambitious. Relying on a few small items left by his ancestors, he started reselling antiques in the early 1980s. At that time, antiques in Beijing were not worth much. A square table made of pear wood was only five yuan. Xiao Na had been in the antique business for decades. He had become Lao Na and had built up a considerable fortune from scratch.

The shopkeeper had overheard Zhuang Rui and Miao Feifei's conversation by chance. He hadn't paid much attention to it at first, but when he saw the confident look on Zhuang Rui's face, he inexplicably decided to see for himself, which led to the scene that unfolded earlier.

Led by the innkeeper, the three entered a private room. After asking the waiter to pour tea, the innkeeper's eyes fell on the cardboard box.

Without further ado, Zhuang Rui introduced himself and then opened the cardboard box, grabbed the rim of the black pottery jar, lifted it out, and placed it on the table.

"This is a bit hard to say. The body is quite thin, somewhat resembling Longkou black pottery, but the patina and glaze are a bit hard to identify..."

The shopkeeper took a magnifying glass and circled the wide-rimmed, large-bellied jar for a long time. He then tapped it with his hand, looking somewhat disappointed. He had never seen genuine Longshan black pottery before, and this thing seemed to be a later imitation, not quite matching the legendary characteristics of black pottery, which was described as "black as lacquer and thin as paper."

The "black as lacquer" characteristic of Longshan black pottery does not refer to a simple black color, but rather a glossy black. However, this piece of black pottery has a dull color, and even the patina is not very solid.

After seeing the shopkeeper's expression, Zhuang Rui chuckled a few times and said, "Boss, you should have tung oil and white gauze here, right? Could you please bring some over so I can clean this piece of black pottery?"

"Tung oil? Isn't that used for furniture maintenance?"

The shopkeeper was puzzled upon hearing this. He had been immersed in the porcelain business for decades and had never heard of tung oil being used to clean ceramics. However, since Zhuang Rui had said so, there must be a reason for it. The shopkeeper quickly apologized and went out to prepare tung oil and gauze.

#### Chapter 303 As Black as Lacquer, As Thin as Paper (Part Two)

Tung oil is the oil extracted from the seeds of the tung tree, a native oilseed tree species in my country. The tung tree belongs to the genus *Vernicia* in the family Euphorbiaceae. It is native to my country and has a long history of cultivation, with records dating back to the Tang Dynasty more than a thousand years ago. During the Yuan Dynasty, tung oil was introduced overseas by the Italian Marco Polo.

Tung oil is a clear, transparent liquid with characteristics such as rapid drying, high temperature resistance, and corrosion resistance. It can replace varnish and paint and be used directly for machine maintenance, indoor wood flooring, wooden ceilings, sauna boards, wooden balcony railings, and

outdoor wood flooring, flower stands, wooden houses, pavilions, fences, wooden bridges, boats, chairs, etc.

However, few people know that diluted tung oil can also be used for the maintenance of ceramics. This is a unique recipe that Uncle De taught Zhuang Rui. The reason why Zhuang Rui agreed to the shopkeeper's request was simply to borrow some tung oil from him. He would have to go through a lot of trouble to buy this stuff himself.

"Xiao Zhuang, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I don't have this in my shop, so I had to borrow it from someone else."

Most furniture stores keep some tung oil on hand, but porcelain stores don't. Zhuang Rui waited for about ten minutes before the shopkeeper came in carrying a small bowl and a thick stack of white gauze.

"Then, shopkeeper, could you please bring two more large bowls?"

Although tung oil is transparent, it contains some impurities and must be filtered before use. This was Zhuang Rui's first time using the formula taught by Uncle De, and he couldn't help but feel a little nervous.

Zhuang Rui took the large bowl handed to him by the shopkeeper, covered its mouth with white gauze, and slowly poured the tung oil from another small bowl into it. Impurities were visible to the naked eye on the gauze. Zhuang Rui then replaced the gauze and filtered the tung oil in the large bowl again. After repeating this process three times, the impurities were finally removed.

After filtering the tung oil, Zhuang Rui took a clean large bowl, filled it two-thirds full with water, and then poured in a small amount of the filtered tung oil, about a spoonful. The tung oil did not dissolve in the water, so Zhuang Rui took a chopstick and stirred it continuously. After three or four minutes, the tung oil, which looked like egg white, dissolved in the water.

After mixing the tung oil and water, Zhuang Rui soaked a clean piece of white gauze in it. Because tung oil evaporates quickly and dries easily, the gauze could only be taken out when needed.

After doing these tasks, Zhuang Rui washed the black pottery jar again, wiped it clean with a dry cloth, and placed it in a sunny spot near the entrance to the backyard. Pottery is not as dense as porcelain, so water will seep into it. Simply wiping the outside clean is not enough. However, in August, the sun is very strong, and it should dry out after a while.

"Brother Zhuang, this old man has really learned something new today. I never knew tung oil could be used like this!"

After Zhuang Rui finished his series of actions, the shopkeeper finally breathed a sigh of relief. He had memorized every move Zhuang Rui made, even the slightest one. You see, generally speaking, people who know these skills keep them a secret. For Zhuang Rui to use this method in front of him was an incredible opportunity.

"It's just a little trick, I hope the boss won't laugh at me..."

Zhuang Rui didn't pay much attention. When Uncle De taught him this technique, he didn't say that it couldn't be used in front of others.

"By the way, boss, do you sell any stationery?"

When Zhuang Rui entered the shop, he noticed several inkstones displayed behind the counter. Zhuang Rui knew that Grandpa Gu was a skilled calligrapher who enjoyed grinding ink and practicing his own calligraphy in his spare time. Visiting the old man tonight to buy inkstones was a good idea; a scholar would give elegant gifts. Buying anything else would likely earn him a scolding from the old man.

"Hehe, I specialize in ceramics, but I don't really have any of the Four Treasures of the Study. Young man, did you see those inkstones in my shop? Someone came to sell them a while ago, and I thought they were pretty good, so I bought them. If you're interested, Young Master Zhuang, I can bring them over for you to take a look."

The shopkeeper stood up as he spoke. He had been unable to sell the inkstones he had acquired, even though they were very cheap. He felt uneasy having them in his possession.

"Brother Zhuang, take a look. If you like it, you can take it and play with it."

The shopkeeper had also had someone examine the inkstones, and they were all quite ordinary, not very old, probably made during the Republic of China era. However, although he spoke generously, Zhuang Rui couldn't really just take them without paying; that would be too impolite.

Zhuang Rui knew very little about inkstones. He only knew that there were four famous inkstones in China: Taohe Stone Inkstone, which is produced in the Taohe River in Lintan County, Gansu Province; She Inkstone, which is produced in Wuxi, at the western foot of Longwei Mountain in Wuyuan, Jiangxi Province; Chengni Inkstone, which is made of filtered fine clay; and Duan Inkstone, which is considered the best among all inkstones. However, he was a layman when it came to distinguishing them.

Zhuang Rui had no choice but to use his spiritual energy to investigate, but the result disappointed him greatly. There was no spiritual energy in these inkstones, and the materials were rough, so they should just be the most ordinary stone inkstones.

Zhuang Rui shook his head and said, "Well, boss, I'm not sure about these inkstones, haha, never mind..."

The shopkeeper wasn't disappointed. He hadn't thought much of these inkstones anyway, and it would be best if he could just get rid of them. But hearing Zhuang Rui's words, he clearly understood. He immediately said, "Young man, if you have some free time later, I'll take you to the Shuyazhai across the street. You can probably find some decent inkstones there."

"Okay, then I'll have to trouble the boss later."

Zhuang Rui nodded, stood up, took the pottery jar from the doorway into the house, and rubbed it with his hand. It was no longer damp, presumably because the moisture that had seeped into the jar had evaporated.

Although the pottery jar had been cleaned, its black color still appeared dull and unremarkable. However, Zhuang Rui knew that this was due to the characteristics of pottery. Just as porcelain would turn slightly yellow over time, pottery would develop a substance on its surface due to oxidation and erosion over time, causing it to become dusty and dull.

Zhuang Rui reached out and took out the gauze soaking in the bowl of tung oil. Then, he carefully and evenly wiped the black pottery jar with the gauze soaked in tung oil. After the jar was completely covered with tung oil, Zhuang Rui quickly took another clean gauze and vigorously rubbed it on the jar. The area he wiped was "black as lacquer and shiny as a mirror," and the color was presented to the shopkeeper and Miao Feifei.

After seven or eight minutes, the entire pottery jar was completely transformed. This pearl of Longshan black pottery, which had been covered in dust for several years, finally revealed its true appearance in Zhuang Rui's hands. The jet-black color, which was both black and shiny, and had a fleshy texture, captivated Zhuang Rui, who was covered in sweat.

No matter what color it is, as long as it is pure to the extreme, it can reveal its unique charm. This black pottery from the Longshan Culture period is just like that. Although there is not a single pattern on it, its extreme simplicity, lightness, elegance and purity give it a mysterious charm.

Once the black pottery placed on the table revealed its true form, it appeared so dignified and beautiful. Its material was delicate and smooth, and its luster was calm and elegant, possessing a soft and serene beauty like that of pearls.

Zhuang Rui picked up the pottery jar and gently tapped it. A melodious jade-like sound rang out from it. The black jar, like ink jade, also contained the light of bronze, reflecting Zhuang Rui's face clearly, like a mirror.

"Young Master Zhuang, you have excellent taste! This old man is truly ashamed of my own inferiority..."

Having witnessed the creation of this piece of black pottery, the shopkeeper's eyes were already gleaming with excitement. As someone who was into ceramics, he naturally knew the value of this item. He estimated that all the genuine porcelain pieces in his shop combined wouldn't be worth as much as this piece of black pottery.

"Oh, that shop owner is too kind. I just happened to hear my elders describe the characteristics of black pottery, and that's how I managed to snag a bargain. It was just luck."

Zhuang Rui smiled modestly. The news of his purchase of the black pottery would probably spread throughout Panjiayuan in a few days. He wondered how angry the smooth-talking stall owner would be when he found out that it was a treasure he had sold.

"Brother Zhuang, would you like to sell this black pottery of yours? This old man can take it, and the price will definitely satisfy you."

After observing for a long time, the shopkeeper finally couldn't resist. Such exquisite black pottery was rare not only in private collections but also in major museums across the country. Therefore, the shopkeeper had the idea of acquiring it.

Before Zhuang Rui could reply, the shopkeeper heard the voice of the girl who came in with Zhuang Rui: "Zhuang Rui, you can't sell it! It's such a beautiful thing. It would be so nice to put it in your living room after your courtyard house is renovated."

Zhuang Rui smiled at the shopkeeper but didn't say anything. Miao Feifei's words echoed his own thoughts; he wouldn't sell this item for money.

However, as for Miao Feifei's suggestion to place it in the living room, Zhuang Rui needs to think about it carefully. After all, this thing is too valuable. He might have to learn from Wei Ge's father and have a special display stand made with some spotlights inside. Although it's a bit flashy, he's doing it to promote traditional Chinese culture.

#### Chapter 304 The Four Treasures of the Study

The shopkeeper watched Zhuang Rui put the black pottery back into the cardboard box, his eyes practically blazing with envy. Unfortunately, it wasn't his own item; he could see it but couldn't touch it, and could only sigh inwardly.

"Boss, let's go take a look at that Shuyazhai you mentioned. I just need to buy some gifts for my elders..."

After Zhuang Rui finished tidying up, he picked up the cardboard box. The most notable feature of this Longshan black pottery is its lightness. Even though it was a large object, he could hardly feel its weight.

"Alright, let's go right now. But I have to say, Brother Zhuang, if you ever want to sell your Longshan black pottery in the future, you absolutely must give priority to my place. The price will be absolutely fair..."

The shopkeeper was still a bit unwilling to give up, so he handed Zhuang Rui a business card. He saw that Zhuang Rui was not very old and might need money at any time, so his opportunity would come.

Zhuang Rui smiled and said, "I will definitely have to deal with that boss again in the future, but I will not sell this item. If that boss really likes it, he might as well find some good things and we can discuss them privately."

Zhuang Rui's words effectively shut down the shopkeeper's idea, but he left him a loophole: it wasn't impossible for him to get the item, but he had to offer something he liked in exchange.

Zhuang Rui's approach is the most popular in the antique trade. In this circle, if you want to buy someone else's item, but they may not be willing to sell, you have to offer something they like in exchange. In this case, the circulation of collectibles in the industry is not really about buying and selling; the vast majority of transactions are exchanges.

Uncle De once told Zhuang Rui a story about how, a few years ago, while searching for old houses in Shanxi, he acquired a complete set of six huanghuali (a type of rosewood) eight-immortal table and chairs. Once, a collector from Beijing visited his home and took a liking to the set, offering four million yuan to buy it. At that time, the price of antique huanghuali furniture was rising, so Uncle De naturally disagreed.

That collector from Beijing really took a liking to this set of tables and chairs. He traveled from Beijing to Zhonghai more than ten times in a year, always pestering Uncle De to buy the set. He even brought several nice collectibles to exchange with Uncle De. In the end, Uncle De couldn't resist his nagging any longer and also took a fancy to the Qing Dynasty Kangxi period iron-red enamel and gold-painted cloud and dragon pattern straight-necked vase that the collector brought out, so he exchanged it with him.

Because everyone has different preferences and collecting interests, it's hard to say who loses out or gains in this kind of exchange. Uncle De collects miscellaneous items but is an expert in porcelain, so he has a greater preference for porcelain. On the other hand, the collector in Beijing likes antique furniture, so he was willing to exchange his Qing Dynasty Kangxi period iron-red enamel and gold-painted cloud and dragon pattern straight-necked vase with Uncle De.

In terms of value, a Qing Dynasty Kangxi period iron-red enamel and gold-painted dragon and cloud design straight-necked vase fetched around seven million at auction that year, while Uncle De's set of eight immortals table and chairs could only fetch a maximum of five million. However, this transaction was successfully completed, and the collector in Beijing had no complaints.

Some friends might say at this point, "You're talking nonsense. I can just sell those Kangxi imperial porcelain pieces and then buy huanghuali tables and chairs. Who would be foolish enough to know they'd lose two million and still go through with it?"

While this is the principle, it may not be feasible in practice. It is true that a Qing Dynasty Kangxi period iron-red enamel and gold-painted cloud and dragon pattern straight-necked vase can fetch seven or eight million at auction, but even if you have that amount of money, you may not be able to acquire a set of eight-immortal table and chairs like Uncle De's.

It's important to know that while there are many old objects left over from various dynasties, very few can be made into a complete set. For example, there is a pair of blue and white dragon porcelain vases from the Qianlong period. One of them once sold for 3.2 million yuan, but when the other one appeared, it sold for a sky-high price of 9.8 million yuan. The reason it was so expensive was simply that the owner of the other vase wanted to complete the set.

Therefore, in the antique trade, bartering is a practice where it's hard to say who loses and who gains; it's a case of willing buyer, willing seller.

"Okay, please leave a message for me, Brother Zhuang, so we can get to know each other better in the future."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, the shopkeeper knew he was no novice and naturally refused to offer any money to buy it. True collectors cannot measure the value of their beloved items with money. Of course, many more people are simply investing in the rising popularity of antiques.

Zhuang Rui took out a business card from the Jade Association and handed it to the shopkeeper. Upon seeing it, the shopkeeper exclaimed that he was being impolite. Although the title of director of the Jade Association was not very high, it was still a semi-official position. It was only because he was too young that he was in charge. If it were someone older, he would be an authority in the jade industry.

"Zhuang Rui, didn't you want to buy an inkstone? Let's go..."

Miao Feifei's personality was completely opposite to her appearance. After waiting for a while, she became a little impatient. She had come all this way to visit Panjiayuan and wanted to go out and hear more stories. Panjiayuan was a veritable panorama of life.

"Alright, you two, follow me. This 'Shuyazhai' is a well-established brand in Panjiayuan. I guarantee you won't leave empty-handed." The shopkeeper noticed that Miao Feifei was getting impatient, so he quickly led the way.

The most important thing about antiques is communication. Collectors can only experience the joy of collecting through communication with others. Therefore, there is no situation of scholars looking down on each other in this industry. On the contrary, everyone is willing to help each other and exchange what they have.

"Shuyazhai" was not far from the shopkeeper's shop, just a dozen meters away. As soon as he entered the shop, several shop assistants greeted the shopkeeper, and they seemed to know each other very well.

"Where's Brother Zhao? Call him out, I'll introduce him to a big client."

The shopkeeper started shouting as soon as he entered, acting as if he were no outsider, and sat down at a square table in the middle of the shop.

This elegant study wasn't very large, about half the size of the shopkeeper's shop. Various antique plaques hung on the surrounding walls, and around the shop was a half-person-high wooden shelf filled with inkstones of all colors. On one wall of the shop, there were many brushes of different sizes, some as thin as chopsticks, while the largest one looked like a mop, making people sigh in admiration.

"Brother, you never come here without a reason. Is there anything I can do for you?"

As the voices spoke, a middle-aged man in his forties walked out from the inner hall. He was slightly overweight, wearing a long jumpsuit, and glasses, and looked very refined.

"Young man, you'd like to buy a set of stationery. Show us what you have on display..." the shopkeeper said, pointing at Zhuang Rui.

"Oh, young man, what kind do you need? Is it a gift or for your own use?" Boss Zhao turned his gaze to Zhuang Rui.

"It's a gift for an elder. Mr. Zhao, could you help me with some information? I don't know much about writing implements." Zhuang Rui did practice calligraphy for a few days when he was in elementary school, but that was ages ago.

"Hehe, there's no need to say much about the Four Treasures of the Study: brush, ink, paper, and inkstone. Each has its own purpose and its own intricacies. As the saying goes: 'A famous inkstone for clear water, ancient ink for new ink, a familiar brush, and old paper.' Together they form a complete set. Let's first take a look at the inkstone, which the ancients praised as the foremost of the Four Treasures of the Study."

As Mr. Zhao spoke, he led Zhuang Rui to the shelf displaying inkstones and said, "I have Duan inkstones from Zhaoqing, Guangdong; She inkstones from Anhui; Lu inkstones from Shandong; Longwei inkstones from Jiangxi; and Chengni inkstones from Shanxi. However, these inkstones are all antiques. Most people would buy them for display, and they wouldn't be willing to wet them to make ink."

Zhuang Rui looked at the antique inkstones that Boss Zhao had mentioned. These inkstones were indeed simple in shape and a bit old in color. One of them was even missing a corner, probably because it was accidentally dropped during use. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that they contained spiritual energy. Boss Zhao was not just talking nonsense.

"Mr. Zhao, what's the price of this inkstone?"

After observing for a while, Zhuang Rui pointed to an inkstone and asked, "It's an inkstone shaped like a child picking lotus flowers. The inkstone is boat-shaped, with a child wearing a bib standing on the boat, reaching out to pick lotus pods from lotus leaves. The inkstone is made of fine stone, with simple and ancient carvings, and the shape is extremely interesting. Moreover, Zhuang Rui observed through his spiritual energy that it was an ancient inkstone, so he decided to buy it."

"Young man, you have a good eye! This is an ancient inkstone from Yishui, Hebei, but it's not cheap."

"Oh? Mr. Zhao, please name a price..." Zhuang Rui didn't care much about the price. This was a token of his appreciation for Old Master Gu, so spending a little more money was no big deal.

"120,000. This inkstone was once used by Li Hongzhang, the Grand Secretary of the Qing Dynasty. I've kept it for several years and have never been willing to sell it..."

Not only did Zhuang Rui not believe what Boss Zhao said, but even Miao Feifei, who was standing next to him, curled her lips. If it was something that Li Hongzhang had used, that would be somewhat possible. As for the reluctance to sell, it was probably because they couldn't agree on a price.

After examining the inkstone for a moment, Zhuang Rui said, "Let's look at other things first. Mr. Zhao, could you help me pick out some good Xuan paper, as well as some good ink and a brush? We can discuss the price after we've chosen what we like."

Zhuang Rui could accept the price of this inkstone. He had troubled Grandpa Gu so many times, so giving him an item worth tens of thousands of yuan was nothing. You know, if Gu Tianfeng had charged a fee for the few jade pendants that he carved for Zhuang Rui, Grandpa Gu wouldn't have taken the job for less than tens of thousands of yuan.

When Mr. Zhao was making his offer, he had been secretly observing Zhuang Rui's reaction. Seeing that Zhuang Rui still looked nonchalant after hearing the price of 120,000, he knew that he had met a big customer. He then carefully selected several other items for Zhuang Rui.

Writing brushes are fragile and difficult to preserve, so very few ancient brushes have survived to this day. Boss Zhao didn't have any, so he provided Zhuang Rui with an ivory brush with wolf tail bristles. Of course, the price was also quite high, with Boss Zhao asking for 12,000 yuan right off the bat.

Chapter 305 Coincidences Make All the Stories

Of the Four Treasures of the Study, paper is the least valued, yet it is the most important. Without paper, no matter how good your calligraphy or how high your skill, your work will not be passed down through generations.

These days, anything even remotely related to culture can be counterfeited, and Xuan paper is no exception. Many unscrupulous merchants use calligraphy and painting paper to impersonate Xuan paper in order to make a profit.

Calligraphy and painting paper is just an ordinary paper with ink-absorbing properties and has a very short lifespan. In contrast, well-preserved calligraphy and painting treasures, ancient books, documents, and seal albums from various dynasties can last for thousands of years without decaying. This is the best proof of Xuan paper's characteristic of "paper lasting a thousand years." The difference between the two is like heaven and earth.

The finest Xuan paper still uses the traditional bamboo screen filtering and paper-making method, and is dried and sun-dried using a heated wall and manual peeling and pasting. Each sheet is inspected visually and manually during the inspection process. Its production process and price are incomparable to those of mass-produced calligraphy and painting paper.

Although the ancients were particular about the use of Xuan paper, they did not understand the production process of Xuan paper. However, several modern masters of calligraphy and painting have left behind this beautiful story.

A large number of calligraphy and painting masters, including Liu Haisu, Yin Shoushi, Wu Zuoren, and Li Keran, made special trips to Xuan paper manufacturers during their lifetimes, despite their advanced age, poor health, and long distances, to learn about the Xuan paper production process.

Liu Haisu once lamented: "We have used Xuan paper all our lives, but we do not understand how it is made. Therefore, we must come and see it before we die. Firstly, to fulfill our wish, and secondly, to express our gratitude to the Xuan paper workers. The Xuan paper workers are our bread and butter. Without good Xuan paper, there would be no good calligraphy and painting works."

The masters expressed their gratitude for Xuan paper by writing inscriptions and creating paintings, which became a well-known story in the calligraphy and painting world. Since then, people have paid more and more attention to the use of Xuan paper.

Boss Zhao selected five reams of top-quality Xuan paper from Shaoxing, Zhejiang for Zhuang Rui. This type of paper is pure white, and according to Boss Zhao, it can be cut to any size, absorbs ink well, and won't deform when damp.

Zhuang Rui touched it and felt that it was soft and tough to the touch. It was actually difficult to tear if he didn't use much force. So he nodded and acquiesced to the price of 1,000 RMB for this six-foot-long piece of Xuan paper. It is said that the poor study literature and the rich study martial arts. If everyone followed Zhuang Rui's standard, the saying would probably be reversed.

"Mr. Zhao, I'll pick out a piece of ink myself..."

Just as Boss Zhao was selecting ink blocks for Zhuang Rui, Zhuang Rui suddenly spoke up because he discovered that on the shelf where the ink was displayed, there was actually an ink block that contained spiritual energy. Obviously, this ink was quite old. Zhuang Rui walked over and picked up the oval-shaped ink block.

When Boss Zhao saw the ink Zhuang Rui had chosen, a slight look of surprise appeared on his face. He said, "Young man, you're not an amateur. This pine soot ink is quite old. I acquired it from that old man's clansman many years ago..."

"The shopkeeper's clansmen?"

Zhuang Rui thought for a moment and couldn't help but laugh. These scholars always speak in circles. Why don't you just say you bought it from the Manchus?

"Yes, brother, the person who sold me this pine soot ink was your master back in the day..."

"Pah! I'm the master of my own destiny now!" The shopkeeper spat at Boss Zhao with a laugh.

The two seemed to have a good relationship. Boss Zhao said with a smile, "Please don't spit on me. He is a descendant of Prince Gong. This pine soot ink was also preserved from the Prince Gong Mansion's inventory. It is made from the soot of the right pine of Zhongnan Mountain. There are not many inks made this way now."

Zhuang Rui nodded, casually handed the pine soot ink to Boss Zhao, and said, "Okay, I'll take this ink. Boss Zhao, could you calculate the total price? I'll take all these items."

"You want that ancient inkstone from Yishui too?"

Boss Zhao spoke up, recalling how Zhuang Rui's noncommittal attitude when he had previously introduced the inkstone. He hadn't expected this unassuming young man to be such a wealthy man.

"Yes, please calculate it."

"The inkstone is 120,000, five reams of fine water-patterned Xuan paper is 5,000, the ivory and wolf-hair brush is 12,000, and the Zhongnan pine soot ink is 9,000. Young man, that's 146,000 in total. I'll round it down to 145,000 for you. How does that sound?"

Mr. Zhao took a calculator, quoted a price, and started calculating. After he finished, he looked up at Zhuang Rui.

"Okay, that's the price Mr. Zhao quoted. Can you pay by card?"

Zhuang Rui had no objection to the price. He hadn't been hoping to find a bargain when he bought these items. Although there were many hidden gems, the shop owners had already thoroughly explored their own collections. The chances of finding a bargain in an antique shop were very slim.

The shopkeeper was a little disappointed after hearing Zhuang Rui's straightforward reply. He had introduced Zhuang Rui to this Shuyazhai shop partly to help his old friend make money, and partly because the stationery sold here was a little more expensive than in other shops. The shopkeeper had even thought that if Zhuang Rui couldn't afford it, he might consider selling the Longshan black pottery piece. However, this plan had obviously failed again.

After buying the set of calligraphy and painting supplies, it was already past 5 p.m., and Zhuang Rui was no longer in the mood to shop around. Since Miao Feifei had to go to work the next day, Zhuang Rui took her home, called Grandpa Gu, and drove straight to the courtyard house where Grandpa Gu lived.

After parking the car outside the alley, Zhuang Rui carried the set of stationery towards the old man's house. The old man had just told him on the phone to come over for dinner.

"You little rascal, didn't I tell you last time not to buy anything? This old man doesn't need anything."

When Zhuang Rui entered the courtyard, he found that the once quiet place had become lively. Several children were chasing and playing, and Gu Lao was sitting under a tree, playing Go with a man in his thirties. When he saw what Zhuang Rui was carrying, his expression turned somewhat displeased.

Zhuang Rui chuckled and placed the box next to the chessboard, saying, "Uncle-Master, please take a look at what this is before you speak. And who is this gentleman?"

"Hello, my name is Gu Yun. You must be Zhuang Rui, the one my dad often mentions?"

The man stood up, shook hands with Zhuang Rui, and took the opportunity to shuffle the chessboard.

"You brat, you always pull this trick when you lose..." Old Gu chuckled and scolded his son, then casually opened the things Zhuang Rui had bought.

"Hey? Xiao Zhuang, you have good taste! You actually managed to buy such a nice item?"

The old man was immediately attracted to the Yishui ancient inkstone. Forgetting what he had just said, he picked it up and started playing with it. The inkstone's design was simple yet had a touch of childlike fun, making it a fine example of Yishui inkstones.

Gu Yun also reached out and took out the wolf-hair brush, then squeezed the pine soot ink in his hand, and said to Zhuang Rui with a smile, "Brother Zhuang, you really know how to give gifts. My old man loves this kind of thing. But this set of writing materials must be quite expensive, right?"

Before Zhuang Rui could reply, the old man said, "Well, this set is worth over ten thousand, but since young Zhuang is rich, I'll accept it. Hmm, young Zhuang, please have a seat. Take good care of this, otherwise it would be a pity if these little devils broke it..."

As he spoke, Gu Lao put the Yi Shui inkstone back into the box, then hurriedly walked into the house with the box. Zhuang Rui couldn't help but chuckle; this way of catering to his tastes was indeed effective.

"Brother Gu, you know about this stuff too?"

Zhuang Rui sat down and chatted casually with Gu Yun. It wasn't surprising that the old man could tell that the item was valuable, but Gu Yun also recognized it at a glance, so he must be a player as well.

"I'm just messing around, that's all I know, and I learned it all from my old man..."

"What have you learned from me? You brat, you gave up a perfectly good university lecturer job to become a foreman, what a good-for-nothing!"

Before Gu Yun could finish speaking, he was interrupted by Old Master Gu, who came out of the house with a look of disappointment on his face.

"Dad, haven't you heard? Even professors are selling tea eggs now. We junior lecturers should naturally follow the trend and try our luck in the business world..."

Gu Yun wasn't angry. He kept bantering with his dad. That's a common habit among Beijingers. Putting everything else aside, their verbal skills are absolutely top-notch. When Zhuang Rui first came here, he was almost fooled by the taxi driver.

"Brother Gu, what are you doing right now?"

Seeing that the old man was about to say a few more words, Zhuang Rui quickly changed the subject. He was also a little curious. In previous years, he had often heard of university teachers going into business, but he never expected to see one sitting in front of him.

Gu Yun glanced at his father's expression, which didn't seem genuinely angry, and said with a smile, "Hehe, I'm just doing a small business. My former mentor was a domestic expert in ancient architecture, and he often had ancient buildings that needed repair. There weren't any professional construction teams like that in China, so I started a company that specializes in repairing ancient buildings..."

"What?! Brother Gu, you're in this line of work?"

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui was amazed. It was truly an incredible coincidence! He had been looking for such a company, and now it had come to him without any effort at all.

"What's wrong? We're earning our living through our own abilities, there's nothing shameful about it!" Gu Yun thought Zhuang Rui was like his father, looking down on his job, and his expression turned somewhat unpleasant.

Zhuang Rui waved his hands repeatedly and said, "No, no, Brother Gu, please don't misunderstand. That's not what I meant. I mean, it's such a coincidence. I just bought a courtyard house a few days ago, but it's a bit dilapidated and needs a lot of renovation. I was just worried about not being able to find a suitable company..."

"Oh? This courtyard house is inhabited year-round, so some parts are quite troublesome to repair. Let's take a look first." Gu Yun's expression softened after hearing Zhuang Rui's words.

"Okay, I wonder if Brother Gu has time tomorrow?"

Zhuang Rui wanted to settle this matter as soon as possible, otherwise, what would he do if he spent 60 or 70 million to buy a house and just left it there as decoration?

Chapter 306 Guests

People generally know little about the restoration of ancient buildings, since there aren't many ancient buildings left in cities nowadays. Apart from some historical cities, there are probably only temples far removed from the world.

However, the profit margin for ancient building restoration is quite high, much higher than that for ordinary house renovation. This is because the industry requires not only professional knowledge but also specific channels to purchase antique-style building materials. These materials are several times more expensive than ordinary building materials, which allows for many shady practices.

Gu Yun's ancient architecture company has developed very well in recent years. Because they once took on the renovation work of the Palace Museum, they are quite famous in Beijing. Now their business is

not only the renovation of ancient buildings, but also undertake some antique building projects requested by clients.

"Brother Zhuang, how big is your courtyard house? How much are you planning to spend on renovations?"

To be honest, Gu Yun didn't really want to take on Zhuang Rui's job because there were many restrictions on construction in the city, especially for courtyard houses. The project wasn't large, but it required a lot of effort. Moreover, the other party was his father's junior, and he felt embarrassed to resort to any shady practices like cutting corners. If it weren't for the relationship between his father and Zhuang Rui, he wouldn't have bothered asking the question at all.

"Brother Gu, I know nothing about this kind of renovation. I can't estimate how much it will cost right now. You'll have to see it for yourself to know. The courtyard isn't very big, maybe two thousand square meters..." Zhuang Rui wanted to build the courtyard house to be nice. As for the money, he didn't care much. He had more than twenty million yuan on hand, which should be enough to spend however he wanted.

"Hmm, over two thousand square meters, that's not very..."

Gu Yun continued following Zhuang Rui's words, but before she could utter the word "big," she suddenly snapped out of her daze, staring at Zhuang Rui in disbelief, and exclaimed, "A courtyard house of over two thousand square meters???"

After seeing Zhuang Rui nod in confirmation, Gu Yun was a little dumbfounded. After a long while, he said, "Alright, I'll go to the site with you first thing tomorrow morning. Brother Zhuang, you're really good at hiding your true abilities. This duplex courtyard of over 2,000 square meters is not cheap. I'm afraid you can't get it for less than 80 million..."

Gu Tianfeng had mentioned Zhuang Rui to his son, but never discussed Zhuang Rui's wealth. He only said that Zhuang Rui possessed an extraordinary intuition and talent for appraising jade. That's why Gu Yun reacted so strongly when he heard that Zhuang Rui's courtyard house was over 2,000 square meters. Having dealt with real estate daily, he naturally knew how much Zhuang Rui's courtyard house was worth.

"Hehe, not that many. Oh, by the way, if I'm going tomorrow, I need to make plans with someone..."

Zhuang Rui remembered the ancient architecture expert his uncle had found for him, and quickly rummaged through his wallet to find the business card. He was going to look at houses tomorrow, and he wasn't sure if the other person would be available if he made an appointment with them today.

Gu Yun, who was sitting closer to Zhuang Ruijin, leaned over for a look and quickly asked, "Hey? Brother, where did you get this business card?"

"Someone introduced me to an expert in ancient architecture, saying he's very famous in China. I'd like him to take a look at the overall layout. Brother Gu, I hope this won't conflict with your plans?"

Zhuang Rui thought that Gu Yun was afraid that Professor Zhou would take the job away from him, so he quickly explained it to him.

"Well, Professor Zhou is my master's supervisor. I must say, you have quite the connections. My supervisor never helps private individuals with house viewings or drawing up blueprints."

It's truly a coincidence. Zhuang Rui was somewhat surprised to hear Gu Yun's words, but it was a good thing. After all, Gu Yun's son wouldn't try to cheat him, right? As long as the quality of the renovation was guaranteed, Zhuang Rui didn't care much about spending a little more money.

However, after hearing Gu Yun's words, Zhuang Rui was still a little unsure about whether he could get Professor Zhou's help. After the call connected, he quickly gave his uncle's name. Fortunately, Professor Zhou checked his schedule and agreed.

Zhuang Rui quickly called Ouyang Zhenwu again and explained the matter. He knew that Professor Zhou's quick agreement was not because of his own face.

After Zhuang Rui finished his call, Old Master Gu was somewhat dissatisfied. He tapped the table and said, "Hey, you two lads, are you ever going to stop? You come here to talk business, don't you?"

"No, Uncle Gu. I came to deliver that set of writing implements to you. If you're not satisfied, I can take it with me later." Zhuang Rui felt that Uncle Gu was similar to Uncle De, both showing him genuine care and concern. Therefore, Zhuang Rui spoke very casually.

"You brat, isn't it only right that I take your set of writing materials? But you're better than my son. All he does is give me things like Brain Gold and Brain Supplements. He never gives his old man anything he likes. He's not filial at all..."

"Dad, you've wronged me..."

Gu Yun cried out that he was wronged by what the old man said. "It's all for your health, old man!" Gu Yun exclaimed. "How come it's become unfilial in the old man's mouth?"

"Dad, dinner's ready."

Just as Gu Yun was about to continue protesting his innocence, his wife came out of the kitchen. Zhuang Rui quickly stood up and called her "sister-in-law." Gu Yun's wife was also a teacher, currently teaching at a university. After greeting Zhuang Rui, she went to catch the children who were running wildly in the yard and brought them to the dining table.

Grandpa Gu has two sons and three daughters. His eldest son couldn't come today because he had something to do, but all the daughters and the youngest son were there, and the dinner was a happy one. While eating, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but think of his maternal grandfather and his family. He thought that if he were in Yuquan Mountain now, it would probably be the same.

"Xiao Zhuang, come with me for a moment."

After dinner, the old man called out to Zhuang Rui and went into his study. In this courtyard, there were two places that no one dared to enter without the old man's permission: one was Gu Tianfeng's study, and the other was where he worked carving jade.

After sitting down in the study, Gu Tianfeng saw Zhuang Rui busy pouring water and making tea. He laughed and got straight to the point, saying, "Alright, stop busying yourself. Tell me, what do you need your uncle to do this time?"

Gu Tianfeng didn't believe that Zhuang Rui had come just to give him the Four Treasures of the Study. Besides, he hadn't told Zhuang Rui about his son's job. Based on his understanding of Zhuang Rui, he must have something to ask of him.

"Hehe, Senior Uncle, you have such sharp eyes, you could even see that..."

"Get out of here! Those fiery eyes are like Sun Wukong's! Hurry up and tell me, I still miss your set of writing materials. If you don't tell me soon, I'll forget about it." The old man chuckled and scolded Zhuang Rui.

"It's like this, Uncle-Master, my mother has found my maternal grandparents in Beijing. In three or four months, it will be my grandfather's 90th birthday. I'm looking for a birthday gift for him. Do you think that piece of mixed-color jade from last time could be carved into a peach?"

Zhuang Rui remembered the multicolored jade stone he had obtained from Xinjiang last time. The center of the stone was pink and it was about the size of a fist. It should be easy to carve it into a peach. When his mother mentioned the gift, Zhuang Rui immediately thought of this stone. However, the stone had already been given to Gu Tianfeng. Even if Zhuang Rui had this idea, he would need Gu Tianfeng's permission first.

Zhuang Rui then mentioned his maternal grandfather's name. He didn't mean to show off his family background, but there was no need to hide it from his Uncle Gu.

"It's him, then we need to think about this item carefully."

Gu Tianfeng was very familiar with the name of Zhuang Rui's maternal grandfather, because many TV series and movies were adapted from the real-life story of Zhuang Rui's maternal grandfather.

Old Gu closed his eyes and began to think, his right index finger still gesturing on the table. After a good seven or eight minutes, the old man opened his eyes, a sly look flashing in them, and said, "I can make that item for you, but you have to do me a favor."

While the old man was deep in thought, Zhuang Rui didn't even dare to breathe loudly. Now, after hearing the old man's confident words, he breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Uncle-Master, just tell me what you need. Don't talk about helping or not."

The old man smiled slightly, stood up, took a box about half a meter in size from a bookshelf, placed it on the table, and opened it. Zhuang Rui found that there were more than a dozen jade pendants and ornaments inside, as well as two small decorative items. Zhuang Rui was a little confused and looked up at the old man.

Old Gu pushed the box in front of Zhuang Rui and said, "Some of the jade inside are real and some are fake. Take a look and see if you can pick out the fakes."

"Hehe, Uncle-Master, are you testing me? I've put in a lot of effort to study jade these past few days."

Zhuang Rui said arrogantly, but when he lowered his head, he released the spiritual energy in his eyes. He had been busy non-stop lately and had no time to study jade. However, with these eyes, it was no problem for Zhuang Rui to distinguish between real and fake jade.

Zhuang Rui deliberately picked up each item one by one and examined them with a magnifying glass. After lingering for more than ten minutes, he picked out a pendant, two jade pendants, and a decorative piece, saying, "Uncle-Master, please take a look..."

"Hmm, not bad, you've picked them all out. Can you identify these fake materials?" The old man nodded, his eyes showing appreciation.

"These two pendants are probably made of resin. This jade pendant is made of nephrite, not jadeite. As for this ornament, it's also nephrite, but with a hint of green. Uncle-Master, am I right?"

After arranging the items for a while, Zhuang Rui shared his insights.

"Alright, now you're qualified to help me."

Gu Tianfeng laughed, took out a large red invitation card from the drawer of his desk, handed it to Zhuang Rui, and said, "There's an appraisal program on Beijing TV the day after tomorrow. They've invited me to be a guest appraiser for jade items. You go in my place."

Chapter 307 Forcing a Duck onto a Shelf

"You want me to... be a guest judge on TV?"

Zhuang Rui was stunned upon hearing this, and his words became stammering. Although he had a good mental fortitude, he had never been on television before, and upon hearing this news, he thought he had misheard.

"That's right, it's about going to the TV station to be a guest judge..." Old Master Gu repeated Zhuang Rui's words.

"No, no, absolutely not, Uncle Master. I've only been in this line of work for less than a year. If something goes wrong, wouldn't that be a disgrace to you?"

Seeing that Old Master Gu didn't seem to be joking, Zhuang Rui shook his head and waved his hands repeatedly. He always flattered the old man, emphasizing keeping a low profile and focusing on making money. He always avoided the limelight of appearing on television. For example, when he was injured in Zhonghai, the TV station asked for an interview, but Zhuang Rui refused.

The old man smiled and looked at Zhuang Rui, encouraging him, "If I say you can do it, you can do it. You're so young, you should have some drive."

"Uncle-Master, aren't you forcing me into this? I have no experience in appraising objects in front of people. What if I mess it up?" Zhuang Rui still refused. This was too unreliable. He could already imagine the way people would look at him when he sat with a group of old men to appraise antiques.

"If you don't try, you'll never gain experience. What's the big deal if you mess it up? I still make mistakes and have to pay my dues every time. I can afford to lose face, so why can't you?!" Old Gu was getting angry when he saw that Zhuang Rui was unyielding, and his tone became louder.

"This old man has his eye on me..."

Zhuang Rui was somewhat helpless, but when his eyes fell on the big red invitation, he looked around and said, "Uncle-Master, this TV station invited you. Wouldn't it be a bit inappropriate for me to go instead?"

Gu Tianfeng looked at Zhuang Rui with a half-smile and said, "Look at that post, my name is written on it?"

Zhuang Rui had been busy making excuses ever since he heard the news and hadn't even looked at the invitation. He picked it up from the table, opened it, and was immediately speechless. The invitation didn't specify who was invited; it was addressed to the Jade Association, hoping they could send a jade appraisal expert to fully cooperate with the on-site appraisal event.

Moreover, this on-site treasure appraisal event is not being held in Beijing, but rather jointly organized by Beijing Television and Shandong Television. The appraisal location is in Jinan, Shandong, a historical and cultural city, and the event will take place the day after tomorrow.

Seeing Zhuang Rui's face turn red and then pale, Old Master Gu smiled and said, "It won't take long, just two days to make the round trip. It won't interfere with your business in Beijing. As for your courtyard house, I'll have Xiaoyun keep an eye on it for you..."

Well, the old man had shut down Zhuang Rui's last excuse. Helpless, he could only nod and say, "I'll go, but Uncle-Master, with so many experts in our Jade Association, why are you sending a novice like me?"

Zhuang Rui was indeed puzzled. What if something went wrong at the treasure appraisal event? It would be a disgrace to the Jade Association.

Gu Lao glanced at Zhuang Rui and said, "Young Zhuang, I recommended you for the position of director of the Jade Association. You are also the youngest among them. In many cases, achievements speak louder than words!"

Zhuang Rui didn't really value the position of director of the Jade Association, and said with a bitter face, "Uncle-Master, I'm just a figurehead in the association."

"You brat, why can't you understand what your old man means? How many more years can I work? After this, it'll all be your world, young people's world, won't it? Let me tell you..."

The old man looked at Zhuang Rui with a hint of disappointment. This seemingly clever boy was usually so slow; how come he couldn't even understand something so simple? He then explained it to him carefully.

After hearing the old man's words, Zhuang Rui finally understood. It turned out that the old man was helping him build momentum. Although the Jade Association was not an official organization, it was a legitimate and authoritative institution for jade testing in China, and the certificates it issued were recognized by all jewelry companies.

The annual turnover of jade sales in China reaches tens of billions of yuan. To sell at high prices and gain consumer recognition, one needs an appraisal certificate from an appraisal institution under the Jade Association. This is a huge market, and the people qualified to set the rules and share the profits are none other than the thirty or forty directors of the association.

Of course, there are also many people who don't care about anything. People like Song Jun and Zhuang Rui don't even know which way the Jade Association's main gate faces. The power of the association is basically in the hands of a few directors and the chairman and vice-chairman.

However, as Mr. Gu gets older, he is no longer able to keep up with the activities of some associations. That's why he thought of pushing Zhuang Rui forward as his representative. In a few years, when Zhuang Rui is older, he can naturally accept his current position. It can be considered as helping Zhuang Rui get started and giving him a boost.

Although he understood Gu Gu's meaning, Zhuang Rui felt both grateful and somewhat helpless towards the old man. He could feel Gu Gu's unreserved support for him, but to be honest, Zhuang Rui didn't really value the position of vice chairman of the Jade Association.

Power also means responsibility. If you were to actually sit in that position, there would probably be a lot of things to deal with. In the past six months, Zhuang Rui has become quite lazy. He admits that he wouldn't be able to go back to a nine-to-five lifestyle.

"What's wrong? You look down on this position as a council member of the association? You're not interested in this expert status?"

Gu Tianfeng, being an old and shrewd man, saw through Zhuang Rui's thoughts at a glance. He knew that Zhuang Rui was now quite wealthy and would definitely have such thoughts. Not only Zhuang Rui, but anyone would feel the same way. With a net worth of hundreds of millions, why bother with so many things? Just live a carefree life.

Furthermore, since Zhuang Rui isn't in the manufacturing industry, he doesn't need to bear any social responsibility. He can simply focus on his own little plot of land, and with the financial support of a jade mine behind him, it seems that Zhuang Rui really doesn't need to do anything else.

Zhuang Rui nodded, readily admitting that in his mind, experts were all old men with long beards and gray hair, seemingly having nothing to do with him, a pure and innocent young virgin who was not yet married. As for the jade association's piece of the pie, with his wealth, he really couldn't be interested in it.

This time, Gu Lao wasn't angry. Instead, he said earnestly, "Xiao Zhuang, humans are social animals. How much a person can develop in the future depends entirely on how broad their vision is. You've won big in jade gambling several times and are now quite wealthy. But can you guarantee that you'll have good luck for the rest of your life?"

That's definitely impossible, so you need to improve yourself. The Jade Association is a platform for training. If you can achieve success in this industry, you will be able to achieve twice the results with half the effort no matter what you do in the future.

By the way, the Jade Association can provide guidance on market jade prices. Having a voice in this market would benefit the development of jade mines in Xinjiang.

The old man's words made Zhuang Rui fall into deep thought. Although the old man did not directly point out that he was a bit impetuous, Zhuang Rui felt that he had become somewhat arrogant recently. After having money, he did not take many things seriously. But what should he do if the spiritual energy in his eyes disappeared?

Moreover, the identity of an expert is entirely beneficial to him. With this identity as a cover, it won't seem so abrupt when he finds bargains on Taobao or makes money gambling on stones.

Having figured all this out, Zhuang Rui was incredibly grateful to Grandpa Gu. He stood up, bowed to the old man, and said, "Uncle-Master, I understand. I'll go to this treasure appraisal event..."

"Hehe, it's good that you understand. People can't be narrow-minded. Gemstones aren't just found in China. You can participate in the association's international exchanges in the future. Emeralds from Brazil, sapphires from Sri Lanka, and diamonds from South Africa are all gemstones and are quite valuable. You still have a lot to learn."

"Senior Uncle, I understand. What was the situation regarding this on-site appraisal? Is there anything you need to tell me?"

Zhuang Rui was filled with anticipation for the gems the old man had mentioned. He knew he would definitely visit their origins someday. Of course, Zhuang Rui was aiming to find some bargains. Although the moon might not be as bright abroad as it is in China, he was sure that money earned overseas would feel much better to spend.

After pondering for a while, the old man said, "You are definitely not a problem with identifying jadeite, but nephrite is your weakness. You should observe more and speak less. If you don't understand something, just say you're not sure. There shouldn't be much knowledge about jade identification. I heard that you also have some knowledge of antique appreciation. You can also exchange ideas with your colleagues."

Old Master Gu's words made Zhuang Rui laugh. The phrase "I'm not sure" is universally applicable. Although it's only three words, its meaning is vast. It can be interpreted as the price being fake, and that he's saying this to save face for you. Or it can be interpreted literally as, "I'm really not sure," like writing the character "王" (king) upside down. Either way, it won't make you look foolish or lose face.

However, after hearing what the old man said, Zhuang Rui became somewhat interested in this treasure appraisal event. Putting aside everything else, meeting some seniors in the antique industry would be a good learning opportunity. Zhuang Rui's interest in antiques has always been greater than that in jade and gemstones.

"What are you doing loitering outside the door? Come in, you sneaky thing."

Grandpa Gu suddenly called out towards the door. As soon as he finished speaking, Gu Yun pushed the door open and walked in, saying, "Dad, you have such sharp eyes! How could you spot me like that?"

"In your hearts, I'm like Sun Wukong, aren't I? Alright, stop arguing with me, just tell me what you want to say..."

The old man was both amused and exasperated by his son's words. This kid, just like Zhuang Rui, was praising people like monkeys. So he simply got up and went out to play with his grandson.

Chapter 308 Demolition and Reconstruction

Gu Yun had indeed been wandering around outside for half a day. Although his company was doing well now, ancient construction work wasn't available every day. There were always a few months of downtime throughout the year. Right now, both of his construction teams were without work. Of course, even when people were idle, their salaries still needed to be paid, which was a considerable expense.

For a company like Gu Yun, taking on small jobs isn't profitable; the meager earnings aren't even enough to cover worker subsidies. However, after hearing Zhuang Rui mention his courtyard house, which spans over 2,000 square meters, before dinner, Gu Yun decided to take on the project. Such a large-scale restoration of ancient buildings, even without cutting corners on materials, could generate a substantial profit for the company just from labor costs.

Gu Yun had originally planned to talk to Zhuang Rui after dinner to get more details about the situation, but his father pulled him away and they talked for half a day before Gu Yun finally came to wander around the door.

After understanding Gu Yun's meaning, Zhuang Rui laughed and explained the situation of the courtyard house to him. After listening, Gu Yun frowned.

"What's wrong, Brother Gu? Is something wrong?" Zhuang Rui asked, somewhat puzzled.

Gu Yun thought for a moment and said, "According to what you said, that courtyard hasn't been inhabited for three or four years and hasn't been repaired for more than ten years. I'm afraid there might be problems with the internal structure of those houses. If that's the case, it'll be a bit troublesome. Don't worry, let's take a look tomorrow and talk about it..."

Zhuang Rui nodded. Even if those houses were no longer habitable, they could simply be demolished and rebuilt. According to Ouyang Jun, the land there was worth at least 50 to 60 million yuan, so he wouldn't lose money.

After giving Gu Yun the address of the courtyard house and arranging a meeting time for the next day, Zhuang Rui bid farewell to the Gu family. He had originally planned to help his mother prepare a birthday gift for his maternal grandfather, but by some twist of fate, he found the courtyard house construction company and even got a job from Grandpa Gu. Zhuang Rui felt that his luck was too good.

...

"Hey, Wood, I'm going back to Pengcheng tomorrow, are you coming or not?" The phone rang halfway as the car headed towards Yuquan Mountain. Zhuang Rui then remembered that he had left Liu Chuan at Ouyang Jun's club.

"I can't leave. I'm afraid it will take another 10 days or so. You should go back first."

After hanging up the phone, Zhuang Rui turned the car around and drove towards Ouyang Jun's club. He had been extremely busy all day, and Bai Shi was still inside the club without eating. Zhuang Rui knew that Bai Shi would never eat anything from outsiders except for himself, his mother, and his older sister.

Back at the club, Zhuang Rui first got Bai Shi some food, then chatted with Liu Chuan for a bit before driving Bai Shi towards Yuquan Mountain. He was going to Shandong the day after tomorrow, a two-day round trip, and he couldn't let Bai Shi go hungry for two days.

When Zhuang Rui arrived at the gate of the sanatorium in Yuquan Mountain, he was stopped from entering. He had come with Ouyang Zhenwu a few days ago, but now that he was here on his own, he was stopped by the armed police at the gate. They only recognized people and not people, and with the huge size of the white lion in the car, they dared not let Zhuang Rui in.

Finally, it was Ouyang Gang's bodyguard who came to the door and led Zhuang Rui inside.

The old woman had a regular schedule and was already asleep by nine o'clock. Zhuang Rui talked to his mother for a while, told her about his plans to go out in the next few days, and handed the white lion over to his mother.

Ouyang Wan had no ties to Pengcheng, so she planned to stay there permanently. The environment of Yuquan Mountain suited her quiet personality, and since she hadn't been able to take care of her parents for decades, it was time to do so. Zhuang Min, on the other hand, was restless. She had only been there for a day and was already thinking about returning to Pengcheng. She planned to leave tomorrow and come back with Zhao Guodong in a while, but she would leave Nannan behind to keep the elderly company.

Seeing that his mother was alright, Zhuang Rui felt relieved. Before going to bed, he went to his maternal grandparents' room and secretly used his spiritual energy to cleanse their bodies again before returning to the room he had prepared for himself to sleep.

...

The next morning, Zhuang Rui arrived at the courtyard house. As soon as he parked his car and entered the alley, he saw two people standing at the entrance of his courtyard house. They were Gu Yun and an elderly man with gray hair. The elderly man had a drawing board on his shoulder.

"Zhuang Rui, let me introduce you. This is my mentor, Professor Zhou. He is Minister Ouyang's nephew, Zhuang Rui." Gu Yun saw Zhuang Rui and quickly came forward to introduce his teacher to him.

"Hello, Teacher Zhou, I'm so sorry to trouble you this time."

Zhuang Rui quickly stepped forward and greeted him respectfully. Even without mentioning the personal relationship between Professor Zhou and his uncle, Professor Zhou's prestige in the ancient architecture circle alone was enough for Zhuang Rui to respect him. Gu Yun had said yesterday that Professor Zhou never did private work.

"You're welcome, young man. The fact that you're thinking about protecting these buildings left by our ancestors makes it worth the trip. This courtyard is nice, the location is excellent, and you can even add a side gate at the back to turn it into a garage..."

Before Zhuang Rui arrived, Professor Zhou and Gu Yun had walked around the perimeter of the four-story house. In the backyard of Zhuang Rui's house, several illegal sheds for business had been erected. The alley there was wider enough to drive a car in; with a few modifications, a garage could be created.

"Thank you very much, Teacher Zhou..."

Zhuang Rui stepped forward and opened the heavy door, inviting Professor Zhou and Gu Yun inside.

Zhuang Rui had never had time to come over since he bought the courtyard. After opening the gate, he found that the place was completely different from the first time he came. The weeds on the ground had been cleared clean, and even the dust on the hanging flower gates had been wiped away. The tall jujube and pomegranate trees in the front and middle courtyards also showed obvious signs of being pruned.

Professor Zhou led Gu Yun to start looking around from the gatehouse, paying particular attention to the wooden structures. However, as he looked around, his brows furrowed more and more tightly. Zhuang Rui, watching from the side, was also feeling uneasy, wondering what was wrong with his courtyard.

"Teacher Zhou, please have some water and rest for a bit. What do you think is the best way to renovate this courtyard?"

Professor Zhou examined everything very carefully, going into and cleaning each room thoroughly. He even used a steel bar he found on the ground to chisel a hole in the wall of one room to observe the condition of the bricks and stones inside. It took him more than two hours to finish looking at the first two courtyards, but he still hadn't seen the rooms in the last two courtyards.

Zhuang Rui couldn't offer much help either. Seeing Professor Zhou and Gu Yun sweating profusely, he quickly went back to the car and got out a few bottles of drinks.

"No rush, rest after you've finished watching..."

Professor Zhou took the drink Zhuang Rui offered, drank a small piece, and then held it in his hand as he continued walking towards the backyard.

Zhuang Rui grabbed Gu Yun, who was about to follow, and asked, "Brother Gu, what do you think is the best way to decorate my house?"

Gu Yun stopped and shook his head, saying, "Brother, although the rooms in your courtyard are well-preserved on the outside, they've been neglected for years. The foundation is fine, but some of the bricks inside are rotten. Look, this brick is one I just pulled out of the house..."

As Gu Yun spoke, he picked up a brick from under his feet, and with a forceful pull, he managed to break the brick in half. He then rubbed the broken surface of the brick with his hands, and with a flick of his wrist, a clump of white ash fell from Gu Yun's palm onto the ground.

Zhuang Rui was dumbfounded by Gu Yun's actions and couldn't help but swear: "Damn it, there were shoddy construction projects in ancient times too?!"

"Hehe, that's not it. The main problem is that no one lives here for years, so the sewers are probably clogged. During the rainy season in summer, floodwater seeps into the house, and after being soaked, the bricks and wood have rotted..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Gu Yun burst into laughter. However, he also felt a little regretful, as he suspected that such a large courtyard with dozens of rooms would eventually be lost.

"Brother Gu, what do you think we should do?"

Zhuang Rui was genuinely anxious this time. Judging from the condition of the bricks and stones, it was probably not something that could be moved into just by repairing it. If it were to be completely demolished and rebuilt as he had thought yesterday, he would have made a huge mistake in buying the house.

"Don't worry, let's see what the teacher says." Gu Yun patted Zhuang Rui on the shoulder and walked towards the backyard.

"Brother Gu, what is Teacher Zhou doing? Why isn't he using a camera?"

Upon entering the backyard, Zhuang Rui saw Professor Zhou take the easel off his shoulder and quickly sketch something on it with a pencil. He was probably drawing the houses. However, he noticed that Gu Yun was carrying a camera, so he couldn't understand why Professor Zhou insisted on drawing with his hands.

Zhuang Rui's voice was a bit loud. Professor Zhou, who was drawing, stopped what he was doing and said, "Young man, you need to know that taking a picture takes only a second, but drawing it might take five minutes. In five minutes, you will see more than in one second, so you can remember it. You don't necessarily have to take a picture."

Zhuang Rui nodded thoughtfully. Society has indeed become much more restless these days. People are trying to accomplish things in the simplest way possible, but they forget that they have already lost a lot in the process.

Gu Yun walked over to Professor Zhou and whispered a few words to him. Then, he said to Zhuang Rui, who was deep in thought, "Xiao Zhuang, this house can no longer be restored using the methods of ancient building repair. I'm afraid it will have to be demolished and rebuilt!"

"Teacher Zhou, is there no other way?"

Zhuang Rui hurriedly asked. Even though he didn't know much about the construction industry, he knew that decorating and building a house were two completely different things. He had originally planned to move in in a little over a month. If it was to be rebuilt, who knew when he would be able to move into the new house?

"Sigh, if there were even the slightest possibility, I wouldn't have let you demolish these old buildings. However, the foundation of this house has been soaked in water for a long time, and the wood has long since rotted away..."

As Professor Zhou spoke, he handed the drawing board in his hand to Gu Yun, then slowly walked to a hanging flower gate in the backyard, grabbed one of the thresholds, and pulled hard. A long strip of wood with colorful paint on it was pulled down. Zhuang Rui went over and took the wood and saw that it was indeed rotten inside.

Seeing this, Zhuang Rui said somewhat dejectedly, "Teacher Zhou, if it's to be rebuilt, will it still retain its original appearance? Also, how long will it take to complete?"

Zhuang Rui bought this courtyard house because he liked its architectural style. If he wanted to buy a villa, more than 60 million yuan would be enough for him to buy a top-tier villa in Beijing. After all, it was only 2004, and the real estate market was just starting to heat up.

"Hehe, you don't need to worry about that..."

Professor Zhou laughed upon hearing this and said, "What a coincidence! This house of yours was specially commissioned by the Ministry of Works to house the ministers of the Six Ministries during the Kangxi era. The blueprints for these houses are still preserved. It's not impossible for you to rebuild it exactly as it was originally, but..."

Professor Zhou paused here, and seeing Zhuang Rui's anxious look, continued, "But if we build according to the original blueprints, the cost will be quite high."

"Approximately how long will it take?"

Zhuang Rui was most worried about this issue. If the house still wasn't built by the time he came to school next year, what was the point of buying it?

"It won't take long. There are about thirty rooms in total. Including the more detailed hanging flower gates, two months should be enough."

Gu Yun chimed in, saying that this was his job, and he could estimate the timeframe with just a glance. He also said that the two-month construction period was a bit long; in fact, if they worked on it quickly, it could be completed in a month or two.

"Okay, let's build it according to the original blueprints. Brother Gu, how much will it cost approximately?"

Zhuang Rui was delighted to hear that the house could be completed in two months. The original house was indeed dilapidated, and rebuilding it would not take much time. Of course, he chose to rebuild it. Moreover, with Professor Zhou around, even the design drawings were unnecessary.

Gu Yun made a mental estimate and said, "Brother, given our relationship, I won't make money off your materials. However, these colored glazed tiles and large blue bricks, among other ancient building materials, will be more expensive. With all the building materials and labor costs, it will probably cost around 15 million."

"Fifteen million?"

"Okay, Gu Ge, but while the exterior of this house will stay in its original style, you need to make the interior more modern. Make sure it has a proper kitchen and bathroom; otherwise, we'll have to use public restrooms."

Zhuang Rui felt a pang of bitterness upon hearing this. The purchase of this house had already cost him over 65 million, and with this additional 15 million, it would be a total of 80 million gone. However, there was no turning back now, and Zhuang Rui had no choice but to grit his teeth and agree.

Chapter 309 The Apprenticeship Ceremony

"After deducting this fifteen million, I really don't have much money left..."

With such a huge expense, Zhuang Rui naturally had many requirements for the rebuilt courtyard house. However, his most important concern was the bathroom, a detail stemming from his childhood.

Before the 1990s, not only in Beijing's courtyard houses, but also in bungalow areas across the country, public toilets were used. Friends born in the 1970s may still remember that the revolutionary work was said to be of equal social status, and the so-called "lowly" in this context actually referred to the latrine shovelers.

When Zhuang Rui lived in the old house as a child, he often threw firecrackers into the toilet during the New Year. He also often had to run to the toilet in the middle of the night because he was in so much pain. So, his first requirement for this courtyard house was that it must have a separate bathroom. Ideally, the room next to the master bedroom in each courtyard should be converted into a bathroom.

Another point is the kitchen. The exterior building can follow the shape and structure of the ancient buildings, but the interior must be modernized. Otherwise, even if Zhuangzi's mother came, she probably wouldn't know how to use the large stove inside.

"Brother Gu, there's a basement in this courtyard house. Could you help me tidy it up, install a new ventilation system, a dehumidifier, and make sure it's secure? I plan to use it as a collection room..."

When Zhuang Rui first came here, he knew that there was a storage basement in the courtyard house, which was located not far from the master bedroom in the backyard. Zhuang Rui had already made up his mind about it at that time.

"Okay, and the side door of the garage, right? I've noted it all down. It's too early to talk about these things now. We'll wait until the overall construction renderings are ready and you need to sign them. You can bring up any requests then."

Although Zhuang Rui made a long list of demands like a nagging mother, Gu Yun remained all smiles. They say the customer is king, and Gu Yun clearly understood this saying perfectly. Even without cutting corners, the project costing over ten million yuan would allow Gu Yun to make a fortune. 60SH.

With the deal settled, Zhuang Rui handed the front door key to Gu Yun, and they were just waiting for the renderings to be completed before construction could begin. Feeling a little guilty that Professor Zhou had come to see the house in the sweltering heat, Zhuang Rui invited him, "Professor Zhou, let's go have a meal together?"

Professor Zhou waved his hand and said, "I'm not going. I'll just have Brother Ouyang prepare a few bottles of 1980 Moutai for me later. Xiao Gu, you come with me too. I don't know where they've put the Kangxi era documents."

Seeing that Zhuang Rui's house was going to be demolished and rebuilt, Professor Zhou felt that he had failed in his duty. He was in a hurry to find the information. Although the information was well

preserved, there was too much of it and it would probably take half a day to find it. That's why Professor Zhou asked Gu Yun for help.

However, Zhuang Rui was unaware that those so-called bottles of 1980 Moutai were something that money couldn't buy.

After locking the front door and handing the key to Gu Yun, Zhuang Rui watched them drive away before getting in his own car and leaving. With the house issue settled, Zhuang Rui felt much more relaxed, but he didn't want to go back to Yuquan Mountain because the pass hadn't been processed yet, making it troublesome to come and go. After calling his mother and finding out that everything was alright, Zhuang Rui simply flipped through his phone book and found Professor Meng's number.

Uncle De had been urging Zhuang Rui to visit his future mentor, and since he had nothing else to do today, Zhuang Rui made the call.

Hearing that it was Zhuang Rui calling, Professor Meng was pleasantly surprised and invited Zhuang Rui to come to his house immediately so they could have lunch together. Zhuang Rui thought for a moment and didn't stand on ceremony. When he passed by a farmers' market, he saw someone selling turtles by the roadside. Zhuang Rui had caught these things in the river when he was a child. They looked wild, so he bought two.

Professor Zhou's residence is in the Peking University faculty village, located behind the Peking University campus. It is surrounded by lush greenery and has an artificial lake, making for a very elegant environment. After parking his car downstairs at the building Professor Zhou mentioned, Zhuang Rui picked up two turtles and prepared to go upstairs.

"Brother Zhuang Rui, Grandpa said you were coming. I didn't even go shopping. What nice things are you bringing me? What are you holding?"

Professor Zhou lived on the second floor. Before Zhuang Rui even entered the building, he heard a clear shout coming from the second-floor balcony. Looking up, he saw Meng Qiuqian staring wide-eyed at the turtle in Zhuang Rui's hand, her face showing disbelief.

Zhuang Rui looked up and chuckled as he entered the apartment building. Professor Meng was already waiting at the door. Seeing the turtle in Zhuang Rui's hand, he laughed and said, "Little Zhuang, I don't accept gifts from students. What's the point of you carrying this?"

"Professor Meng, I saw someone selling them on the way here. They looked wild, so I bought some to help you recover. Consider it a gift from your student to my teacher." Zhuang Rui had spent some time with Professor Meng in Shaanxi and knew he was a very kind person, so he joked with a smile.

Meng Qiuqian ran over with a basin used for washing vegetables and told Zhuang Rui to put the two turtles in the basin.

Professor Meng stopped on the ground with great interest, looking at the two turtles in the basin, and said in a serious tone: "Hmm, their limbs are yellow, and their skirts are thick, so they are wild. This one is also quite big. Turtle meat can cure weakness and night sweats, lower back pain and leg pain, and can also nourish yin and kidneys, clear heat and remove blood stasis, and strengthen the spleen and stomach. Xiao Zhuang, thank you. This old man will accept this gift."

Upon hearing Professor Meng's words, the little girl became anxious. She grabbed the basin with both hands, held it protectively in front of her, and said, "No, I want to keep them. Grandpa won't let me eat them." It seems she treats the two turtles Zhuang Rui bought as pets.

"Okay, Grandpa won't eat them. Xiao Zhuang, come in and have dinner. I showed off my skills today."

Professor Meng still doted on his granddaughter. After she brought the turtle to the kitchen, he invited Zhuang Rui to sit down at the table. Professor Meng's cooking skills were really good. From the time Zhuang Rui made the phone call until now, only thirty or forty minutes had passed, and he had already prepared seven or eight dishes. There was also an old hen stewing in the kitchen.

"Brother Zhuang Rui, I made these cola chicken wings. Try them and see if they're good!" Meng Qiuqian placed a plate of golden-fried chicken wings in front of Zhuang Rui, looking at him with hopeful eyes.

"I'll do it myself, I'll do it myself..."

Seeing the little girl preparing to serve him a piece, Zhuang Rui quickly picked up his chopsticks, grabbed a piece, and put it in his mouth.

"This...this is cola chicken wings?"

Zhuang Rui forced himself not to spit out the chicken wing in his mouth, but his taste buds were numb. This taste was way too salty!

"Yes, is what I made delicious? I'd like to try some too."

Seeing Zhuang Rui's expression, the little girl could pretty much guess that her masterpiece wasn't very good. She picked up a chicken wing, but only took a small bite. She didn't have Zhuang Rui's patience and immediately spat it out.

"Failed again, Lucas. Here, there's something good to eat..."

The little girl's eyes darted around, and she set her sights on her pet Lucas. But to her surprise, Lucas, who had been lying by the dining table, suddenly jumped up and "whoosh!" disappeared under the bed in the room, making Zhuang Rui burst into laughter.

With the little girl's witty banter, the meal was quite pleasant. After the meal, Professor Meng took Zhuang Rui into his study.

Professor Meng pointed to a stack of books on the table and said to Zhuang Rui, "Knowing you'd be coming to Beijing soon, I've prepared all the review materials for you. If you have any questions, just come to my house..."

"Thank you, Teacher Meng. I'll definitely need to bother you often in the future."

Zhuang Rui flipped through them and found they were mostly books on classical Chinese and chemistry, which were quite targeted and suitable for him.

Professor Meng had other things to do in the afternoon, so after asking him for some guidance on key points for review, Zhuang Rui said goodbye. However, Meng Qiuqian, who was on summer vacation, was a little reluctant to let him go. She made Zhuang Rui promise to bring Bai Shi next time before letting him leave.

...

While driving, Zhuang Rui suddenly heard his phone ring. He glanced at the unfamiliar number, pressed the answer button, and a pleasant female voice came through: "Hello, is this Mr. Zhuang?"

"This is Zhuang Rui. May I ask who you are?" Zhuang Rui pulled the car over to the side of the road and answered the phone.

"Oh, Mr. Zhuang, I'm from Beijing TV. I wanted to confirm with you about attending an antique appraisal event in Jinan tomorrow. Are you sure you can attend the event tomorrow?"

It turned out to be the organizer of this treasure appraisal event. Old Master Gu said they would call Zhuang Rui, but he hadn't received a call yet. Zhuang Rui was a little puzzled at first, and then said, "I can participate. What is the specific itinerary? Please tell me first."

"If it's convenient for you, we'll meet at the TV station tomorrow, then we'll drive to Jinan. After lunch and a short rest, the live treasure appraisal event will begin at 3 PM. We'll stay in Jinan for one night, and the next morning we'll have half a day for activities. In the afternoon, we'll organize a tour of Jinan's famous sights for the guests, and then return to Beijing in the evening..."

Liu Jia was the host and producer of the on-site treasure appraisal event. She had just received the faxed information about Zhuang Rui, a director of the Jade Association, this morning. However, she was a little unsure about his age of 25, which seemed too young. After confirming with the relevant person in charge of the Jade Association, Liu Jia called Zhuang Rui.

This is understandable, considering that the people participating in the on-site treasure appraisal event were all quite prominent, including an associate researcher from the Palace Museum, the general manager of a famous auction house, and domestic experts in the appraisal of calligraphy, paintings, and miscellaneous items. It was indeed somewhat distrustful for Zhuang Rui, who was only twenty-five years old, to be among them.

"Okay, I'll be there on time tomorrow..."

After agreeing, Zhuang Rui hung up the phone. For him, distinguishing between genuine and fake jade or even antiques was not difficult. What he needed to learn was how to identify what was real and what was fake.

#### Chapter 310 Expert (Part 1)

The next morning, Zhuang Rui drove to Beijing TV Station. Because he was not familiar with the roads, he needed to use electronic navigation to find his way. He was also worried about traffic jams, so he left Yuquan Mountain a little earlier and arrived at 7:40 a.m.

However, Zhuang Rui was stopped at the entrance of the TV station. The reason was simple: his license plate was from out of town. These days, there are too many people coming to Beijing to petition. They can't get into the ministries' compounds, and the security at CCTV is very tight. So many petitioners have to settle for second best and often go to Beijing TV stations. Therefore, vehicles without a pass issued by the TV station or a Beijing license plate are generally not allowed to enter.

"Hey, I'm saying, even with this pass, you're not allowed in?"

Zhuang Rui pointed to the pass for the Yuquanshan Sanatorium that had just been issued yesterday on the front of the car and said to the young armed policeman guarding the gate.

"I'm sorry, this pass is not valid for entry. Who are you looking for?"

The armed police officer saluted him, glanced at the pass with the special prefix, but still didn't let him pass.

"I was invited by the TV station. Oh, and here, take this..."

Zhuang Rui remembered the invitation and quickly handed it over through the car window. It worked perfectly; after verifying Zhuang Rui's ID, he was allowed to pass.

Inside the TV station compound, a luxury minibus was already parked. A tall, young woman in business attire was standing in front of the bus, constantly looking towards the entrance. When she saw Zhuang Rui's car come in, she glanced at the license plate, but seeing that it was from out of town, she didn't pay much attention to it.

Liu Jia, a popular host on Beijing TV, has hosted many live events, but this is her first time independently planning and producing a program. In addition, it is a joint event with a TV station from another region, so she was a little nervous. She arrived at the TV station early in the morning to prepare to welcome the guests of this treasure appraisal event.

In recent years, the antique investment market has been booming, with even CCTV launching its own treasure appraisal program. Local TV stations are also vying to follow suit. This live treasure appraisal event was jointly organized by Beijing TV and Shandong TV's "Collection World" program. The station's leaders also attached great importance to this program, and the photography and hosting team consisted of the station's pillars.

...

"Hello, this is Zhuang Rui. We've arrived at the TV station..."

After parking his car, Zhuang Rui took out his phone and dialed the number from yesterday.

"Hello, Mr. Zhuang, this is Liu Jia. I'm right here in the yard next to this car. I don't see you here."

Liu Jia kept her eyes fixed on the entrance of the TV station. There were still more than 20 minutes before the start of work, and very few people were coming in and out. Apart from one out-of-town car coming in, she didn't see anyone else enter.

"I drove in, you probably didn't see me. Okay, I see you now."

Zhuang Rui parked his car in the yard. After walking around the front of the minibus, he saw Liu Jia making a phone call.

At this moment, Liu Jia also saw Zhuang Rui. She quickly hung up the phone, walked over to Zhuang Rui, and extended her hand, saying, "Hello, I am the host and producer of this program. My name is Liu Jia."

"I am Zhuang Rui, and I am very happy to participate in your program."

Zhuang Rui extended his right hand, shook the other person's soft, boneless hand, looked her over, and couldn't help but admire her in his heart.

Today, Liu Jia is wearing a white business suit. The open collar of the suit reveals her beautiful face, long neck, and collarbone. Looking further down, her small but firm breasts accentuate the perfect lines of the suit. Below her slender waist, the knee-length skirt makes her high, pert buttocks protrude outwards. If viewed from the side, it would definitely be a perfect S-shape.

In Zhuang Rui's opinion, apart from being slightly shorter than Qin Xuanbing, this host was just as good-looking and had a similar temperament, except that her smile was a bit too professional.

While Zhuang Rui was sizing up Liu Jia, Liu Jia was also observing Zhuang Rui. According to his information, this jade appraisal expert was a year younger than her, which was enough to arouse Liu Jia's curiosity.

Standing at around 1.8 meters tall, with an ordinary appearance, Liu Jia was slightly surprised when she saw Zhuang Rui's eyes through his glasses. Those bright eyes radiated a strong sense of confidence, making his otherwise ordinary appearance come alive.

Zhuang Rui dressed very casually, wearing a gray plaid short-sleeved shirt and dress pants, which he bought at a brand store yesterday. He would be facing a lot of people at the treasure appraisal event, so he couldn't just wear jeans and a t-shirt, could he?

However, Zhuang Rui's outfit, which cost over two thousand yuan, was destined to be unwearable. After a brief conversation with Liu Jia, he was led onto a minibus, where a young man handed him a brand-new jumpsuit, saying it was the uniform for the guests, and then took out a bag to pack Zhuang Rui's original clothes into.

"Mr. Zhuang, let me introduce you. This is Director Zhu from our TV station, who is also the leader of this event."

After Zhuang Rui changed his clothes and got out of the car, a middle-aged man wearing glasses appeared next to Liu Jia. He shook hands with Zhuang Rui with a forced smile, clearly looking down on the expert in front of him and putting on an air of superiority.

"Would the station director personally intervene? It's probably just a deputy station director."

Zhuang Rui didn't mind; it was all expected. After greeting Director Zhu, he got into the car and went to enjoy the air conditioning. Although it was morning, the weather was unbearably hot.

After waiting for another ten minutes or so, the other appraisal experts arrived one by one. Sitting in the car, Zhuang Rui noticed that Director Zhu's originally stern face immediately broke into a smile. He quickly stepped forward, shook hands with the experts, and repeatedly said that he had long admired them.

The host, however, seemed to feel a bit neglected by Zhuang Rui, so he got into the car and chatted with him for a while.

Once everyone had arrived, Director Zhu waved his hand, and the minibus drove out of the television station.

Including Zhuang Rui, there were a total of six people, who formed the expert group for this treasure appraisal event. However, the other five were quite familiar with each other and chatted and laughed after arriving. Although they did not deliberately ignore Zhuang Rui, no one went to talk to the young man.

"It is an honor to have invited all of you experts to participate in this folk treasure appraisal event and promote national culture. I am Liu Jia from Beijing TV. It will take more than three hours to get to Jinan. Shall we introduce ourselves to each other?"

Liu Jia saw that Zhuang Rui was sitting by the window, and no one was talking to him, making him seem a bit lonely. So she stood up and tried to liven up the atmosphere.

"Xiao Liu, you're a big shot at Beijing TV, everyone knows you! I, Lao Jin, am a big fan of yours..."

A chubby, round-faced middle-aged man in his forties teased Liu Jia a few times before speaking first: "My surname is Jin, and I work at the Palace Museum. My friends call me Fatty Jin. We're all old acquaintances, so there's no need for further introductions, right?"

Upon hearing the man's name, Zhuang Rui looked up and sized him up. He had heard Uncle De mention Jin Pangzi before; Jin Pangzi specialized in the appraisal of calligraphy and painting and was the direct disciple of the calligraphy master surnamed Aisin Gioro. He had a great reputation in the industry, and he hadn't expected that Jin Pangzi would be invited by the TV station this time.

"Hehe, my name is Qian Jun. I've dealt with most of you here before. I work at the Kyoto Auction House now. I'm certainly not as professional as you all, but I do know a bit about the prices in the antique market. If you have any good items and don't come to me, Qian Jun, that would be really unfair."

A middle-aged man sitting in front of Zhuang Rui also stood up and introduced himself. Among the experts present, he was probably the closest in age to Zhuang Rui, around thirty-seven or thirty-eight years old. He had a smile on his face the whole time, probably due to his profession.

Then the other three people stood up and introduced themselves one by one. People who are familiar with the antique circle are mostly worldly-wise. A few words from them made the young people in the car laugh out loud, and the atmosphere in the car became lively.

Zhuang Rui had heard of two of the three men. The lean old man in his early sixties sitting behind Zhuang Rui was nicknamed Sun Dasheng. He was a well-known expert in miscellaneous items in China and had a good relationship with Uncle De. Zhuang Rui had seen a photo of him and Uncle De together.

The other expert was a bronze ware and antique furniture appraiser, over fifty years old, and very humorous. Zhuang Rui had also heard of him.

The last person to stand up and introduce himself was Tian Fan, a colleague of Fatty Jin and a researcher at the Palace Museum. He had a deep understanding of ceramics. He was a man of few words; he stood up, said a few words, and then sat down. It was Fatty Jin who spoke up to help him finish the introduction.

Although Zhuang Rui didn't have any particular fondness for experts, he was still slightly excited to be with these renowned domestic antique collection and appraisal experts. Putting aside everything else, being able to learn a few things from them would make the trip worthwhile.

Antiques are generally divided into six categories: porcelain (including ceramics), bronzes, miscellaneous items (ivory carvings, wood carvings, bamboo carvings, snuff bottles, lacquerware, etc.), calligraphy and painting, jade, and furniture. In this car, experts from almost every field are present, making it a formidable lineup.

"Mr. Zhuang, would you please introduce yourself?"

Just as Zhuang Rui was categorizing these people, Liu Jia's voice suddenly came from beside him, and he was stunned for a moment. He had completely forgotten that he was also an invited jade appraisal expert and was among those who were qualified to introduce themselves.

Zhuang Rui quickly stood up, bowed slightly, and said, "I am quite excited to meet all the teachers in the antique industry. My name is Zhuang Rui. I have some knowledge of jade and gemstones. I currently hold a nominal position as a director of the Jade Association, but I am also very interested in antiques. I would like to take this opportunity to ask you all for your guidance."

"Well, young people should always benefit from learning from a few teachers..."

Master Zhu's voice was somewhat sarcastic, as he was feeling resentful. All the organizations invited to this event had sent their best and brightest, who were all well-known figures in the industry. Only the Jade Association didn't give them any face, actually sending a young man in his early twenties. This made Master Zhu feel somewhat embarrassed, so he hadn't given Zhuang Rui a friendly look.

Zhuang Rui glanced indifferently at Director Zhu, who had spoken disparagingly to him, but said nothing. This nobody was so arrogant and domineering; Zhuang Rui simply couldn't be bothered with him.

"Don't talk about learning. Xiao Zhuang is so young, yet he has already made a name for himself in the jade industry. He must have some special skills. We should exchange ideas more often in the future."

The speaker was the auction house's general manager. He was a businessman and naturally very shrewd. Although Zhuang Rui was young, he didn't look down on him.

"Hehe, I wonder what kind of antiques Xiao Zhuang likes?"

Fatty Jin also asked with a smile. They were also full of curiosity about this young guy. It was the first time they had ever seen a 25-year-old director of the Jade Association.

"I have a wide range of interests, including miscellaneous items and porcelain. I studied under Uncle De for a period of time in Zhonghai..." Zhuang Rui intentionally mentioned Uncle De's name.

"Old Ma? Hey, we're not strangers here. Come, come, sit in the front. How's Brother Ma doing? He hasn't been to Beijing for a while. I was just thinking of going to visit him sometime."

As soon as Zhuang Rui said this, the old man surnamed Sun immediately beckoned him to sit down. Given his relationship with Uncle De, it would be unreasonable not to look after Zhuang Rui.