

Golden 47

Chapter Forty-Seven: Rosewood

"Hehe, Brother Zhuang, it's only been a day, you haven't forgotten your brother, have you?"

The man who walked out of the door laughed loudly. This man was none other than Song Jun, who had bought Zhuang Rui's manuscript of Wang Shizhen yesterday.

Zhuang Rui was slightly taken aback, but then he understood. Putting everything else aside, it was perfectly reasonable for someone like Song Jun, a shareholder of the Tiandu Hotel, to own a villa there. Moreover, although Song Jun spoke in a friendly manner, he possessed an imposing aura that suggested he might have other identities that Zhuang Rui was unaware of.

"Da Chuan brought me here without mentioning that we were here to see you, Brother Song. But we're unwelcome guests, so please treat us to dinner tonight..."

Zhuang Rui joked that although he came from the Ping family, he was always humble and respectful to people because of his mother's upbringing. Perhaps there are class distinctions in this society, but this is absolutely not reflected in Zhuang Rui.

Song Jun was taken aback by what he heard. It seemed like it had been a long time since anyone had spoken to him in such a tone, which made him feel a little strange. He patted Zhuang Rui's shoulder affectionately, put his arm around him, and walked into the villa. As they walked, he said, "Okay, let's go to Tiandu again today. You can order as much abalone and lobster as you want. Look how green your face was yesterday. I'll let you eat back what you spent yesterday. Is that alright?"

"Hey, Brother Song, just lend us your car, I'll treat you to dinner, how about that..."

Liu Chuan followed behind, speaking whenever he could find an opportunity.

"You brat, you've been nagging me about this little thing for over half a month. Fine, today I'll let you use that car for Brother Zhuang's sake. Damn it, I haven't even driven it more than a few times yet, don't you dare break it to pieces. Also, if I'm not satisfied with the Tibetan Mastiff you found for me, you won't get a single penny..."

Song Jun turned his head and looked at Liu Chuan fiercely, but he had a smile on his face, so he was obviously not really angry. Zhuang Rui also understood that the old customer that Liu Chuan was talking about was actually the man in front of him.

It's understandable that they wouldn't give it to them. On the way here, I saw several villas with fierce wolfhounds chained up in their yards. When they saw strangers approaching, their bared teeth and snarled appearance was quite frightening. I imagine that thieves would avoid them from a distance.

In fact, Zhuang Rui didn't know that in such a heavily guarded villa area, keeping these creatures wasn't entirely for security; it was more about displaying a status symbol. In some large cities, some people even kept large carnivores like black leopards and crocodiles in their private luxury villas.

Upon entering the villa, Zhuang Rui was immediately struck by its unique features, not its luxurious interior. Directly opposite the entrance was a massive mahogany screen, about two meters high, divided into twelve panels, adorned with carvings of dragons and phoenixes, effectively separating the room from the outside world.

After passing the screen, Zhuang Rui discovered that the hall was about fifty or sixty square meters in size, and the walls on all sides were covered with a kind of purple wood, which emitted a light fragrance that calmed people down without them even realizing it.

The furnishings in the hall were very simple, consisting of old-fashioned antique-style furniture. They were called antique-style because they lacked the sense of time that comes with age. Upon closer inspection, it was clear that they were newly made. There was not a trace of modern appliances in the entire hall. As soon as Zhuang Rui entered, he felt as if he had been transported back to the dwelling of people from hundreds of years ago.

Zhuang Rui stared intently at a square sandalwood table beside him. Sure enough, it contained no spiritual energy whatsoever, which proved that although the furniture was made of very precious materials, it was a modern product.

"Brother, what do you think of my place? Isn't it even more antique than that private room in the teahouse? I put a lot of thought into these rosewood furniture pieces."

Song Jun's tone revealed a hint of pride. He bought the villa for about 20 million RMB, but the money he spent on the renovation alone has already reached 30 million RMB. The vast majority of the money was spent on the rosewood, which he personally selected from Southeast Asia. This type of rosewood has become extinct in many places, and Song Jun went to great lengths to buy it from some people at high prices. Then he hired skilled carpenters to craft it.

"Brother Song, you're really generous! You probably can't find another room like this in the whole country."

Zhuang Rui's compliment was genuine; he estimated that these rosewood furniture pieces alone were worth several million, but he didn't realize that he had underestimated their value.

Rosewood is a hardwood that grows only an inch every hundred years. Mature rosewood trees are now extremely rare in the world. A Chinese rosewood table made during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty in the 18th century sold for over \$35 million at a Sotheby's auction in the United States in 1994. The saying "an inch of rosewood is worth an inch of gold" is truly apt; its value far exceeded Zhuang Rui's imagination. Even if it wasn't an antique from the Ming or Qing Dynasties, its price was still incredibly high, beyond the reach of ordinary people.

Rosewood is hard and heavy, sinking in water. Objects made from it naturally exhibit a dark brown color without the need for varnishing. In addition, due to its remote origin and extreme difficulty in cultivating the wood, it has been hailed as the "King of Woods" throughout history. In China before the Ming Dynasty, even the imperial family only produced a very small number of exquisite chess sets, scrolls, song boards, and small stands using very little material.

It wasn't until Emperor Yongle (Zhu Di) ascended the throne that, in order to promote the prestige of the Celestial Empire, he dispatched the eunuch Zheng He to lead a fleet on a voyage to the Western Ocean. The fleet was loaded with gifts such as tea and silk, which were presented to the countries along the way. On the return journey, the ships were much lighter because the cargo had been unloaded. Fearing that they could not withstand the wind and waves at sea, ballast containers were needed.

Zheng He and his entourage discovered that some countries had very solid and heavy purple wood, so they ordered people to cut it down for ballast. After returning to China, some royal families and nobles began to use this "ballast wood" to make furniture. Later, people discovered that this wood was not only strong and hard, but also water-resistant and insect-proof, so it became more and more popular, and large-scale logging began.

Actually, there was once sandalwood in the Guangdong and Guangxi regions of my country, but because of its scarcity, it was quickly depleted. Later, the Ming Dynasty emperor sent people to Southeast Asia to purchase it. According to records, "By the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, most of the world's sandalwood was gathered in China and stored in Guangzhou and Beijing. The Ming Dynasty over-harvested it, and by the Qing Dynasty, it had not yet regenerated, so the source was exhausted."

By the mid-Qing Dynasty, Emperor Qianlong had sent people to Southeast Asia to procure sandalwood, but most of the sandalwood trees were too small to be easily grasped and were not yet mature enough to be of good quality, so they had to give up. Therefore, the sandalwood used by the Qing Dynasty royal family to make furniture was all from the Ming Dynasty's imperial reserves. Later, sandalwood became so scarce that it had to be purchased at high prices from private merchants. According to the unwritten rules at the time, no matter what rank an official was, if they saw sandalwood, they could not let it go and had to buy it all and hand it over to the royal weaving agency. From then on, the privately held wood was also plundered. By the time of Empress Dowager Cixi's 60th birthday and Emperor Guangxu's wedding, the imperial reserves of wood were almost depleted, and in the end, they were all used up by Yuan Shikai, who restored the monarchy and ascended the throne.

Before the Qing Dynasty, Europeans and Americans believed that there was no large piece of rosewood available and that it could only be used to make small objects. Even when a large number of Western missionaries came to China in the early Qing Dynasty, they were amazed by the many large rosewood pieces they saw and realized that the best rosewood pieces were all in Beijing. So they bought them from various sources and transported them back to their countries. Due to the inconvenience of communication, it was difficult to transport whole pieces, so they only bought patterned components such as cabinet doors and chests and attached wooden frames made of other materials as decoration. Now, many collectors abroad have some rosewood items from that period.

Moreover, the production of rosewood furniture is quite time-consuming. To create a high-quality and exquisite rosewood craft, each piece must be handmade. A large piece of furniture often requires more than a dozen craftsmen to spend seven or eight years to complete. However, the items in this hall are not very large, and the production process is not particularly complicated.

There is a saying in the craftsmanship of Zitan wood carving: "one chisel, two carvings, seven polishings." Polishing alone takes up seven-tenths of the entire production process. The tools used for polishing are also quite unique. First, wax is applied, and then it is repeatedly rubbed with horsetail grass and fine gauze until it shines like brocade. Only then is the work considered complete.

When Zhuang Rui first entered, he judged the age of these rosewood pieces by their newness or age. Little did he know that well-preserved Ming and Qing dynasty rosewood furniture could be just as impressive as newly made rosewood pieces in terms of appearance.

"Hahaha... Brother, you flatter me. Compared to the King of Sandalwood, my things are nothing."

Song Jun was delighted to hear this, but he waved his hands repeatedly, not daring to accept such praise from Zhuang Rui. The "King of Sandalwood" he was referring to was Ms. Chen Lihua, the curator of the China Sandalwood Museum and China's richest woman with a net worth of over 5 billion yuan. Song Jun had once had the privilege of entering Chen Lihua's sandalwood warehouse and had personally seen the thousands of exquisite sandalwood tables, beds, desks, and small tables. He knew that his own collection was far inferior to Chen Lihua's.

It was after seeing Ms. Chen Lihua's collection of sandalwood that Song Jun decided to decorate his living room in this way. Sandalwood has a magical effect of nourishing people, and prolonged contact with it is very beneficial to the body. For example, when Chen Lihua was making sandalwood furniture, the yellow teeth of some of the craftsmen she hired turned particularly white, and a craftsman in his seventies even turned his white hair black, which gave sandalwood a mysterious aura.

"Hey Wood, let me tell you, Old Man Lü and the others have never been here before. I told Brother Song yesterday that you were coming, and he agreed right away. You've got some connections, kid..."

Although Liu Chuan was young, he was a straightforward person and got along well with Song Jun, which is why he was able to enter this villa. In the entire Pengcheng, no more than ten people had ever visited Song Jun's villa.

"Alright, we're all brothers, why bring up that? Liu Chuan, when have you ever behaved properly in front of me?"

Song Jun waved his hand, interrupting Liu Chuan, and pulled Zhuang Rui to introduce the rosewood furniture in the room, unaware that Zhuang Rui's mind was not on this at all.

"Brother Song, I heard from Grandpa Lü that you love calligraphy and paintings the most. You must have acquired quite a few fine pieces over the years. Could you perhaps broaden my horizons a bit?"

More than half an hour later, Zhuang Rui patiently listened to Song Jun's explanation before asking a question. This was obviously Song Jun's residence in Pengcheng. Zhuang Rui naturally wouldn't leave empty-handed after entering a treasure trove. He had this idea as soon as he met Song Jun.

Upon hearing this, Song Jun's face showed a hint of embarrassment. He said, "Brother Zhuang, it's true that I like calligraphy and paintings and antiques, and I have indeed collected quite a few fine pieces. However, apart from the manuscript you mentioned yesterday, none of these items are currently in Pengcheng. They're at my grandfather's residence in the capital. That old man has taken all my treasures; he's a complete scoundrel..."

When Song Jun mentioned his grandfather, he seemed to be filled with anger, his tone revealing a deep resentment. Zhuang Rui, who was standing next to him, naturally did not know that the old disrespectful man Song Jun was talking about was once a powerful and influential general who commanded respect on the battlefield. Even now, he was a man whose every move could shake the very foundations of the capital.

"But Brother Zhuang, don't be disappointed. When you have time to go to the capital, I'll take you to see where Grandpa lives. Most of those things belong to me, so the old man will still give me that much face."

Seeing the disappointment on Zhuang Rui's face, Song Jun quickly spoke up. However, he himself was unsure whether his unreasonable grandfather would give him the face he was entitled to. As the saying goes, grandparents are more affectionate towards their grandchildren. His father was like a mouse before a cat when he saw his grandfather, and while his grandfather was affectionate towards him, he had also taken all the treasures he had collected over the years for himself.

"Alright, with Brother Song's words, I'll definitely pay him a visit another day..."

Zhuang Rui was not just being polite. For the sake of the spiritual energy in his eyes, he would find a time when the Song army was in the capital to visit him.

"Alright, you two, stop being so jealous. Woody, I told you yesterday I had a surprise for you, so I'll take you to see it now."

Sitting on the rosewood stool, Liu Chuan felt it was far less comfortable than sitting on a sofa, and he was already impatient. When Song Jun finished introducing things to Liu Chuan, he quickly pulled Zhuang Rui and walked towards the door.