

Golden 621

Chapter 622-623 Reception (Parts 3 & 4)

"Bring more funds?"

Zhuang Rui frowned upon hearing this. A few days ago it would have been fine, but who knew Raytheon would suddenly have an extra plane? After deducting the purchase price and airport lease fees, Zhuang Rui didn't have much money left.

"Brother Huangfu, please send the relevant information about this auction to my email address so I can make a selection..."

After thinking for a while, Zhuang Rui decided to bid on some items selectively, to see what was up for auction.

After giving his email address to Huangfu Yun, Zhuang Rui hung up the phone and sat on the bed to think.

Currently, I only have about 60 million RMB at my disposal, which is just over 6 million euros. Considering the prices of European and American artworks, that's probably only enough to buy one-tenth of a Picasso or Van Gogh painting.

Although the craze for Chinese cultural relics has only emerged in recent years, the prices have risen dramatically due to the involvement of international speculators and the behind-the-scenes manipulation of auction houses. With Zhuang Rui's limited funds, he really has no confidence that he can definitely bid on any items.

"Honey, are you short on money? How about I ask Daddy to lend you some?"

Qin Xuanbing pulled back the covers and sat down next to Zhuang Rui. She knew that after buying the private jet, Zhuang Rui didn't have much money left. Of course, for ordinary people, it was still an astronomical sum.

"No need, Xuanbing, I'm just going to take a look, I might not even buy anything..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head. That old woman from over a hundred years ago was so useless, why should he pay for her? Besides, those international art speculators would love for more people like Zhuang Rui to participate in auctions, so that the value of Chinese art would be driven up again.

Compared to domestic prices, international prices for cultural relics are much higher, largely due to the actions of these behind-the-scenes speculators.

As a result, some domestic antique dealers, in order to make huge profits, have tried every means to smuggle large quantities of cultural relics abroad. Yu, the boss in Shaanxi, is just one of these people. Although his criminal gang has been destroyed, domestic law enforcement agencies are powerless to reach the suppliers of cultural relics overseas.

Having figured this out, Zhuang Rui felt enlightened. Since he was going to Europe anyway, he might as well treat it as a chance to see what a top international auction was like. As for whether he would buy anything, he would see how things went. If he found any treasures that foreigners didn't recognize, Zhuang Rui wouldn't mind making a purchase.

"Zhuang Rui, it's not like I'm not going to pay you back, why are you unwilling to lend me some money..."

Seeing that Zhuang Rui rejected her suggestion, Qin Xuanbing pouted, which made her feel that Zhuang Rui did not consider the Qin family as one of his own.

Seeing Qin Xuanbing's expression, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but laugh. He put his arm around Qin Xuanbing and said, "Xuanbing, you're overthinking it. I just don't want anyone to maliciously hype up Chinese cultural relics. It's like a robber stealing things from your house and then demanding that you pay ten or even a hundred times the price to get them back. Would you be happy about that?"

Qin Xuanbing didn't know much about modern Chinese history, and nodded as if she understood. As long as she knew that Zhuang Rui wasn't a stranger to her, that was enough.

Nothing happened that night. The next day, accompanied by Qin Haoran, Zhuang Rui first picked up Peng Fei and his group from the hotel, and then drove directly to Hong Kong Airport, where people from Raytheon Company were waiting.

The aircraft is registered in Hong Kong, and all the necessary procedures for its operation have been completed. Once Zhuang Rui signs off, the deal will be finalized, and it can be flown back to Beijing immediately.

"Wow, Zhuang Rui, that plane is called... Xuan Rui?!"

After the car entered the airport, it stopped in front of a small to medium-sized plane. As soon as Qin Xuanbing got out of the car, she was attracted by the three words on the silver-colored plane.

"Yes, let's call it Xuanrui!"

Zhuang Rui hadn't told Qin Xuanbing the name of the plane, wanting to surprise her. Seeing Qin Xuanbing cover her mouth with joy, her eyes already brimming with tears, Zhuang Rui gently put his arm around her shoulder.

"Zhuang Rui, thank you..."

Qin Xuanbing, who has always been quite traditional in public, suddenly raised her head and kissed Zhuang Rui.

If he wasn't afraid of his own woman, what was Zhuang Rui, this grown man, afraid of? He immediately opened his mouth and kissed her. They hadn't even arrived in the romantic city of Paris yet, and the two had already shared a passionate kiss in public.

"Cough...cough cough..."

Qin Haoran couldn't stand it anymore. Damn it, this brat hasn't even married his daughter yet, and he's already acting so presumptuously in front of his father-in-law. However, Qin Haoran forgot that it was his daughter who took the initiative just now.

"Uh, what are you looking at us for? Go do what you're supposed to be doing..."

After Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing's passionate kiss was interrupted by his father-in-law, they realized that they had become a spectacle for each other.

Not only were the flight crew staring at them, but several foreigners from Raytheon were also watching them intently. They were immediately furious and waved for the flight crew to begin receiving the aircraft and checking the data.

"Oh, dear Zhuang, you're even more enthusiastic than us Americans... uh, that kind of libertine..."

Tom, who had successfully completed the deal, was also present. To demonstrate his good relationship with the young Asian tycoon, Tom muttered nonsensical idioms while preparing to hug Zhuang Rui.

"Damn it, if you can't talk, then don't talk, get out of here..."

Zhuang Rui shoved Tom aside impatiently and shouted at the crew members, "What are you all standing there for? Go check the information they provided and get on the plane to inspect it..."

Seeing that Zhuang Rui was serious, everyone held back their laughter. The staff of Raytheon Company cooperated with Zhuang Rui's crew to start work. In fact, these tasks had already been completed a few days ago, and this was just routine work.

Only now did Zhuang Rui have time to observe the private jet that now belonged to him. Holding Qin Xuanbing's hand, the two of them walked around the plane.

The fuselage of this silver-gray Hawker 400 uses the latest composite materials, making it lighter. Its unique 450-knot high-speed cruise and unique swept-wing design make it faster than similar products.

The three Chinese characters on the sleek fuselage were particularly eye-catching. Many passengers walking across the boarding bridge looked at Zhuang Rui's private jet with envy, especially some Chinese tourists who started to speculate after seeing the three characters.

"Xuanbing, go up and take a look..."

Given the altitude of this aircraft, there is naturally no need for a jet bridge. There is an automatic spiral staircase at the cabin door, and it only takes three to five steps to enter the cabin.

Stepping into the cabin, the aisle is not as spacious as that of a regular civilian airliner, but the interior decoration is extremely luxurious.

The cabin layout is a standard 8-seat configuration, equipped with double club-style leather executive seats, which are quite spacious. The four seats at the back can be folded down and connected together to form a bed for guests to rest. Various kinds of foreign wines are placed on a small table in the middle of the seats.

Zhuang Rui estimated that the cabin was about 7 meters long, about 2 meters wide, and over 1.8 meters high. Presumably, the person who ordered this plane was also tall.

Zhuang Rui agreed to buy the plane for two reasons: firstly, it was time-saving and inexpensive; secondly, he was attracted by the cabin's height, which meant he wouldn't have to bend over to get in.

"Dear Zhuang, this is a specialty red wine from Massachusetts, USA. It's a gift from our company to our esteemed client..." Tom, who was following behind Zhuang Rui, introduced the wines to him.

"Tom, thank you for your kind offer, but we're buying an airplane, aren't we?"

Zhuang Rui curled his lip. He'd never even heard of Massachusetts wine, a specialty of the state. Who knew if it was some kind of famous Chinese liquor like "Erguotou"? Three yuan and twenty cents a bottle, you could buy a whole case for a few dozen yuan.

"Of course, our plane is the best, Zhuang. To travel in such a plane, sipping red wine, is such an intoxicating experience..."

Tom was interrupted by Zhuang Rui, but he showed no impatience and continued to explain the airplane to Zhuang Rui.

At the rear of the cabin are luxuriously furnished restrooms and sinks, with bright glass and carpeted floors that make you feel like you're not on an airplane.

After inspecting the rear cabin, Zhuang Rui went to the cockpit. This Hawker model has two pilot seats, meaning it requires a captain and a co-pilot. At this moment, He Shuang, a pilot from the military, and Ding Hao, who was recruited from the civil aviation industry, were familiarizing themselves with the control panel under the guidance of the other pilot.

"Old He, how's it going? Is it any good?"

Zhuang Rui looked at the four LCD screens and the dense array of electronic switches, and his head started to ache. These things were too complicated. Zhuang Rui was a little unsure about the two pilots. One of them had flown fighter jets before, while the other had flown large aircraft. He wondered if they could handle this one.

"Tch, Brother Zhuang, do you know what a point-and-shoot camera is? This operating system is similar to a point-and-shoot camera; I could open it right away..."

Before He Shuang could reply, Peng Fei, who was standing to the side, curled his lips. To be honest, he really knew how to fly this plane. Although his previous training was not comparable to that of Bond or 007, he could still handle the basics of piloting a plane.

Of course, if Peng Fei were to fly, Zhuang Rui would absolutely refuse to get on the plane; a helicopter would be more likely.

"Mr. Zhuang, no problem. This aircraft is very easy to operate. Both the manual and automatic navigation systems are advanced, making it much easier to fly than fighter jets and transport planes..."

He Shuang knew a little about Peng Fei's past identity and didn't mind what Peng Fei said. He joked with Zhuang Rui, saying that he was very satisfied with his current job. His wife and children were now living

in an apartment provided by Zhuang Rui in Beijing, and the school had been arranged for them, so he had no worries.

Most importantly, He Shuang knew that private jets were not widely used in China, giving him plenty of time to spend with his wife and daughters and make up for the years he couldn't take care of his family while serving in the military.

"That's good, that's good..."

With the experts speaking, Zhuang Rui naturally couldn't show distrust. He circled the cockpit and returned to the cabin, where he found the two flight attendants in their uniforms quite pleasing to the eye.

One of the flight attendants, Tianya, is two years older than Zhuang Rui and has already reached the supervisor level at the airline.

Actually, if she worked a little harder each month and flew more flights, Tianya's monthly income would be about the same as what Zhuang Rui offered. The reason she agreed to switch jobs was because she valued the more flexible schedule offered by private jets.

The other girl, Liuli, was in a similar situation to Tianya. She had just gotten married and wanted more time to relax, since serving a few people on a private jet was easier than dealing with so many guests on a regular flight.

Moreover, not only He Shuang knew this, but they all understood that private jets are currently used very little in China. They might be busy at times, but for 11 months of the year, they are basically idle.

Liuli and Tianya were quite satisfied with their new work environment, and they weren't afraid of being harassed by their boss, because the boss's wife was always with them, so the harassment they experienced at the airline wouldn't happen.

"Dear Zhuang, how is it? Are you satisfied with this plane?"

After Zhuang Rui got off the plane, Tom immediately came over. There were still some documents that Zhuang Rui needed to sign before the transaction would be considered complete.

For the first time today, Zhuang Rui smiled, nodded, and said, "Tom, I'm very satisfied, but I hope your company's after-sales service will be as you promised..."

In fact, when Zhuang Rui first saw the plane, he already felt that the huge sum of money spent was worthwhile. The silver eagle-like curves and colors greatly satisfied Zhuang Rui's fantasy of flying.

Tom winked at Zhuang Rui and whispered, "Dear Zhuang, don't worry, we have an office in Hong Kong, and in the near future, perhaps one will be in Beijing too. You might even see me there..."

Tom has already received word that the company is planning to set up an office in Beijing. Although no specific person in charge has been chosen yet, Tom, who is fluent in Chinese, is definitely on the list of candidates.

After taking the documents from Tom, Zhuang Rui glanced at them and signed his name. Thus, the nearly 100 million yuan transaction was officially completed.

"Zhuang, this is our company's VIP card. Please accept it. On behalf of Thor Corporation, I would like to invite you to visit our company at a suitable time. The phone number on the card is available 24 hours a day. Just give me the card number when you arrive..."

After Zhuang Rui signed the document, Tom solemnly handed him a card. This was actually one of their marketing tactics, because 40% of their customers who visited the company ended up buying a second Raytheon private jet. Of course, the performance of the second jet was better than the first one, and the price was naturally higher.

Zhuang Rui took the card. At this time, the pilot from Thor Corporation had also completed the handover with He Shuang and the others, and the group said goodbye and left.

Co-pilot Ding Hao leaned out of the cabin and said to Zhuang Rui, "Mr. Zhuang, the flight route to Beijing has been approved, and we can take off in half an hour..."

Air travel restrictions in Hong Kong are far less stringent than in mainland China. As long as there are open routes, you can take off at any time. Of course, using the airport runway also requires paying a considerable fee.

"Dad, let's go back to Beijing first, and then head straight to London in a few days..."

Zhuang Rui turned around and bid farewell to Qin Haoran. He felt a little unworthy of the father-in-law seeing off his son-in-law.

"Okay, go ahead, have a safe journey!"

Qin Haoran patted Zhuang Rui on the shoulder. He was quite pleased to be able to entrust his daughter to such a talented young man. When he was Zhuang Rui's age, he was still squandering his father's money and pursuing luxury cars and beautiful women. Of course, Qin Haoran was not married at that time either.

After Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing boarded the plane, they waited for about half an hour before He Shuang's voice rang out in the cabin, informing Zhuang Rui that they were about to take off.

The plane slowly accelerated on the runway. Looking at the scenery rushing past the window, Zhuang Rui felt a lightness in his body. The plane had already left the runway and taken off, while the scenery on the ground was gradually getting smaller.

Unlike large passenger planes, this Hawker business jet is not very loud during takeoff, and there is no ear-swelling sensation.

"Mr. Zhuang, we have now reached an altitude of 12,000 meters and activated the automatic navigation system. The current speed is 850 kilometers per hour. We are expected to arrive at Beijing Airport in three hours..."

After entering high altitude, the plane became stable. At least Zhuang Rui felt that it was not much different from flying on a large passenger plane. Looking at the white clouds outside the window, Zhuang Rui was slightly excited. This was his own plane, and he was the owner of this plane!

Peng Fei felt quite pleased with himself. He paced around the cabin a few times and said, "Brother Zhuang, this plane is much better than a transport plane. It's great; you got your money's worth..."

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui glared at Peng Fei with annoyance and said with a laugh, "Get lost, kid. You're only destined to ride a transport plane. Do you think I'd waste my money to suffer?"

"Sister Tianya, how do you feel about the stability of this plane? How is its performance if we fly to countries like Europe?"

Zhuang Rui just had a good feeling about himself, but for the real performance, you should ask the professionals. Peng Fei's words can't be taken seriously. That guy is good at handling guns and knives, and of course, he can fly a plane, but not everyone will dare to ride in it.

"Mr. Zhuang, for a small passenger plane, this aircraft's performance is already excellent. Even encountering light turbulence won't affect it, just like the flights I used to work on..."

"Yes, although this type of aircraft doesn't have enough fuel for intercontinental flights, it's still quite easy to fly to various European countries as long as you choose the right refueling points..."

Although it was also their first time flying on a private jet, Tianya and Liuli had five or six years of experience working and could still distinguish some subtle differences between the two types of aircraft. In terms of comfort, a private jet was definitely better; you could lie down or sit as you pleased without anyone interfering.

Upon turning on the LCD TV on the plane, Zhuang Rui discovered that Raytheon had actually installed a satellite TV receiver, capable of receiving television channels from dozens of countries.

Zhuang Rui, Qin Xuanbing, and two flight attendants chatted and watched TV. Two or three hours passed quickly. At He Shuang's prompting, they fastened their seatbelts, and the plane began its descent.

The landing was smooth, without the expected turbulence. Under the airport's guidance, He Shuang skillfully parked the plane on the tarmac rented by Zhuang Rui. The maiden voyage of the "Xuan Rui" was a complete success.

"He Shuang, contact this person. We're heading to Paris the day after tomorrow morning. Have him arrange the flight route and airports for refueling along the way. You and Ding Hao can handle the specifics..."

After the plane came to a stop, Zhuang Rui called He Shuang and Ding Hao over and handed them a business card. This person was a powerful figure in civil aviation, and Zhuang Rui had just made contact with him a few days ago through Ouyang Jun.

However, Zhuang Rui didn't have that much time to deal with these things. From now on, he planned to hand over all matters related to airplanes to He Shuang and the other person. Who has ever seen a big boss running around for private jet routes?

After finishing this, Zhuang Rui asked Tianya and Liuli to prepare some food and fruit for the plane, and to buy back anything the airline had on board that they could think of.

After explaining these things, Zhuang Rui got out of the car with Qin Xuanbing and Peng Fei. Hao Long had already received Zhuang Rui's call and parked the car not far from the plane, saving Zhuang Rui the trouble of hailing a taxi outside the airport.

Only then did Zhuang Rui feel a sense of superiority; the money he spent... was definitely worth it.

After returning home in Beijing, Zhuang Rui went to see Chairman Ouyang again in a very serious manner. However, what drove Ouyang Jun crazy was that Zhuang Rui came to him again to ask for his help. RMB is not used in Europe, and Zhuang Rui wanted Ouyang Jun to exchange his 60 million into Euros.

"These things look pretty good..."

Zhuang Rui frowned as he looked at the information Huangfu Yun had sent him.

Judging from the available information, all the items auctioned at this Paris auction can be considered national treasures, ranging from calligraphy and paintings by famous figures throughout history to imperial porcelain and bronzes. Zhuang Rui's several million euros are really not enough to compare.

"Damn it, why should I have to pay to buy back what those foreign devils stole..."

Zhuang Rui grew angrier and angrier as he looked at the auction. He angrily slammed his fist on the table and started racking his brains. Was there any way to sabotage the auction?

"Protest? March? Or how about putting pressure on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs?"

Zhuang Rui shook his head. Foreigners don't buy into that. Even if the Ministry of Foreign Affairs protests, they still won't listen. Besides, relations between China and France haven't been very good in recent years. The long-standing Sino-French friendship of the de Gaulle era is now a thing of the past.

After thinking for a long time, Zhuang Rui still couldn't come up with any ideas, so he could only shut down the computer and take it one step at a time. Zhuang Rui could only do his best to avoid taking action himself.

However, Zhuang Rui has no way of knowing or preventing large domestic conglomerates from bidding on Chinese cultural relics.

Chapter 624 Indignation

"Brother Huangfu, thank you for your help. I need you to pick me up from the airport..."

After Zhuang Rui's private jet came to a stop at Charles de Gaulle Airport, Zhuang Rui disembarked. The weather in Paris had been quite bad these past few days, with a light drizzle falling from the sky. Huangfu Yun, holding an umbrella, stood in front of a black sedan.

"Hehe, Brother Zhuang, you've got quite the airs! This must be your wife, right? Holy crap, why did you bring a lion with you?!"

Huangfu Yun came forward and saw Qin Xuanbing behind Zhuang Rui. He opened his shoulders to give her a hug, but then he saw the white lion jumping out of the cabin. Huangfu Yun was so frightened that he quickly dropped the umbrella in his hand and jumped back a few steps as if he had been electrocuted.

The white lion raised its head and glanced at Huangfu Yun, shook off the raindrops that had fallen on it, and followed behind Zhuang Rui. After being on the plane for more than 10 hours, the white lion was quite bored.

"This is a white lion, a snow mastiff, not a lion, Brother Huangfu, it's alright, white lions won't bite..."

Zhuang Rui couldn't help but laugh when he saw Huangfu Yun's actions. However, the white lion was really eye-catching. Zhuang Rui opened the door of the car that Huangfu Yun had driven and let the white lion sit in the passenger seat.

Zhuang Rui's original intention in buying this plane was to take the White Lion out for a spin. Although the White Lion missed the maiden flight, Zhuang Rui still decided to bring it along on this trip to England and France.

"Brother Zhuang... Brother Zhuang, you still need to drive this car. I... I can't..."

Upon suddenly seeing the white lion's enormous size, even Peng Fei's legs went weak, let alone Huangfu Yun. The fact that he didn't fall to the ground was a testament to his courage.

Back at the Capital Airport, the appearance of the white lion scared Tianya and Liuli so much that they screamed. Even He Shuang and Ding Hao were terrified when they saw the white lion.

However, the white lion is incredibly docile when it's near Zhuang Rui, quietly lying there the whole way. Tianya and Liuli have grown fond of this big guy, but their numerous attempts to feed it have all ended in failure. Aside from Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing, the white lion now only accepts food from Peng Fei.

"I'll drive, I know Paris very well..."

Qin Xuanbing smiled and got into the driver's seat. However, Huangfu Yun only drove one car, so Zhuang Rui had to let Peng Fei and the crew go to the hotel together. He Shuang still had some matters to attend to with Charles de Gaulle Airport regarding the grounding issue.

Paris is the capital and largest city of France, as well as its political and cultural center. It is one of the four world-class cities, alongside New York, Tokyo, and London.

Paris is the largest city in continental Europe and one of the most bustling cities in the world. As soon as Zhuang Rui got off the plane, he felt that the temperature here was lower than in Beijing, probably less than 10 degrees Celsius.

After leaving the airport, the car entered a highway and, after about twenty minutes, drove along the beautiful Seine River into the city of Paris.

Driving through the culturally rich streets of Paris, one can see various museums, theaters, gardens, fountains and sculptures everywhere, creating an extremely strong artistic atmosphere. Along the way, Zhuang Rui saw more than one couple kissing in the street, and passersby seemed to take it all for granted, with no one stopping to watch.

"Is that Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris?"

As the car drove through the center of Paris, Zhuang Rui saw a Gothic-style Catholic church. Although he was geographically illiterate, he still knew about Notre Dame Cathedral, which Hugo described.

Qin Xuanbing nodded and said, "Yes, Zhuang Rui, let's go there together tomorrow..."

Paris is a romantic and sentimental city. People from all over the world are captivated by its atmosphere, and Qin Xuanbing was no exception. She also wanted to hold Zhuang Rui's hand and stroll slowly through the streets and alleys of Paris.

French cuisine is on par with Chinese cuisine, and shopping is dominated by the Champs-Élysées. When Qin Xuanbing worked as a jewelry designer in London, she would come to Paris for two days every week. Compared to the rainy and damp London, Paris was undoubtedly more attractive.

"Great! Let's go check it out tomorrow. Brother Huangfu, isn't the auction the day after tomorrow?"

After Zhuang Rui figured out the key point, he lost interest in the auction. Taking out treasures looted from China and then selling them to the Chinese at high prices was a robbery.

Before Zhuang Rui arrived in Paris, relevant national departments had protested and condemned the auction. However, the French side covered up the ugly auction by claiming it was a private commercial activity. Since the state was unable to resist it, Zhuang Rui naturally had no way to stop it. He just lost much of his interest in the auction.

With this realization, Zhuang Rui felt it would be better to spend time with his wife in Paris, a city steeped in culture, which also has many aspects worth exploring.

"It's the day after tomorrow, Brother Zhuang. I've decided to withdraw from this auction..."

Huangfu Yun's words surprised Zhuang Rui. If he didn't want to participate, why did this guy come all the way to Paris?

"Was it because of that statement in China that you saw the true nature of this matter?"

Zhuang Rui asked with a smile, "Huangfu Yun is a good friend. He is very honest. More importantly, although he has a green card, he still considers himself a Chinese citizen."

"These artifacts were provided to the auction house by the French Frey family. I asked a friend to investigate, and it turns out that these artifacts from China are not the most valuable in the Frey family. The most valuable items, such as the Qianlong jade seal and portraits of emperors and ministers from various Qing dynasties, are still kept in their home..."

Huangfu Yun did not answer Zhuang Rui's question, but instead revealed a piece of news that shocked Zhuang Rui.

"Damn it, it's that bastard again..."

Zhuang Rui couldn't help but swear. He was familiar with the name "Frédéric," who was the highest-ranking French general in the French army during the Eight-Nation Alliance's invasion of Beijing in 1900.

In recent years, however, the name of this looter has frequently appeared in the art market related to Chinese art, and has been associated with many precious Chinese cultural relics.

The only source for the painting "Portrait of Consort Chunhui" that Zhuang Rui saw in his email, which was advertised by the auction house, was a single sentence in the auction catalog: "from the Frey family collection."

"By the way, Brother Huangfu, how did you know about these things?"

Auction houses always keep the information of sellers who put up items for auction strictly confidential. Even if Huangfu Yun's friend is an employee of the auction house, he probably wouldn't dare to disclose it, as that would be illegal.

"Let's talk about it when we get back..."

Huangfu Yun shook his head and didn't continue the topic. Instead, he started introducing the cultural landscape of Paris to Zhuang Rui. However, once the topic was brought up, Zhuang Rui lost interest in it and remained somewhat absent-minded even after arriving at the hotel.

Although Zhuang Rui wasn't the kind of hot-blooded, angry young man, he felt extremely uncomfortable that cultural relics left over from thousands of years of national history were being openly auctioned off by a family of robbers.

After entering the hotel room that Huangfu Yun had already booked for Zhuang Rui, Zhuang Rui asked eagerly, "Brother Huangfu, stop hiding things, what exactly happened? How many of our country's cultural relics does the Frey family still have?"

"Here's the thing, I have a junior from university in Paris who's very enthusiastic about this. But since he's a student, he's also been involved in some things, so I hired a private investigator to look into it. They found that most of the Chinese artworks in Paris came from the Frey family..."

Huangfu Yun's words startled Zhuang Rui. It turned out that this guy, who seemed unassuming, had even hired a private investigator behind the scenes. However, as Huangfu Yun's story unfolded, Zhuang

Rui's expression gradually became serious. Huangfu Yun's investigation was far more detailed than the history Zhuang Rui knew.

When the Eight-Nation Alliance invaded Beijing, the French headquarters was stationed in the Shouhuang Hall in Jingshan Park. According to the Qing Dynasty's ancestral rules, the portraits and seals of the deceased emperors and their consorts had to be enshrined in the Shouhuang Hall.

The French Major General Fauré and his men naturally wouldn't let the treasures in the Shouhuang Hall go to waste. It is said that Fauré himself had a good understanding of art, and many of the Chinese artworks he looted are recorded in the archives of the Shouhuang Hall.

Frey returned to France laden with spoils, and he and his descendants enjoyed a very comfortable life thanks to these "trophies."

The twelve sets of imperial seals from the "Peiwenzhai" collection used by Emperor Kangxi of the Qing Dynasty, a "Treasure of the Supreme Emperor" belonging to Emperor Qianlong, and the Qing court paintings "The First Scroll of Emperor Qianlong's Southern Inspection Tour" and "The Seventh Scroll of Emperor Qianlong's Southern Inspection Tour" all originated from the Frey family and have achieved remarkable results in the auction market in recent years.

In addition to the artworks that ended up on the market, Frey donated 18 important Chinese artifacts to the French government in batches between 1925 and 1934, including the fourth volume of "Magnolia" painted by Giuseppe Castiglione and four other portraits of Emperor Qianlong and his consorts.

Of the four oil paintings, the "Half-length Portrait of Emperor Qianlong in Court Attire" is generally recognized as being painted by Giuseppe Castiglione. As for its provenance, as Frey stated in a letter to the Guimet Museum in 1914, it all came from "the Shouhuang Hall in Beijing, the site of the headquarters of the French Expeditionary Force, where ancestral emperors were worshipped."

This auction is yet another major move by the Frey family. One wonders just how many precious cultural relics these robbers actually stole from China back then.

"Damn it! This bastard doesn't know how to return the stuff to China, what kind of nonsense is it to give it to a French museum?"

Zhuang Rui stood up angrily. Hearing this was infuriating; the feeling of watching a national treasure being auctioned off was truly unbearable.

This is actually due to differing stances. If Zhuang Rui had robbed the Japanese Imperial Palace, he would never have returned it, no matter what.

Chapter 625 Paris

"Should we send Peng Fei to wreak havoc on the Frey family?"

The thought suddenly popped into Zhuang Rui's mind, but he quickly dismissed it. No matter how capable Peng Fei was, he wasn't 007; if he really stirred up big trouble, it could escalate into an international dispute.

Huangfu Yun had no idea what Zhuang Rui was planning. Seeing Zhuang Rui deep in thought, he immediately said, "Brother Zhuang, actually, these things are all because of those people back home who have spoiled us..."

In fact, the root cause of the loss of Chinese cultural relics is the Chinese themselves. There are at least 50 wealthy individuals in China whose collections cost hundreds of millions of yuan, and the main source of these collections is overseas auctions.

Huangfu Yun once conducted a survey and found that more than 85% of the collections that these wealthy people bought back from overseas auction houses were official kiln porcelains from the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties, with Qing dynasty official kiln porcelains being the most prevalent.

According to Huangfuyun, these Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasty imperial porcelain pieces, which are often priced at hundreds of thousands or even tens of millions of yuan, are merely a sector hyped up by international auction houses in recent years and cannot be considered "national treasure" level cultural relics at all.

Zhuang Rui nodded and said, "I do know that. Some bronze artifacts and national treasures are not allowed to be auctioned in China, so many people smuggle them overseas. In fact, most of the buyers are wealthy people in China, and some people simply buy items directly from tomb raiders..."

"Huh, how do you know so much?" Huangfu Yun asked, somewhat puzzled.

"Nonsense, have you forgotten that I'm about to start Professor Meng's graduate program..."

Zhuang Rui glared at Huangfu Yun with annoyance. "I almost lost my life because of those tomb raiders, how could I not know?"

Later, when Zhuang Rui met with Professor Meng, Professor Meng repeatedly mentioned the problems facing the antique world, which were also issues facing the archaeological community: the inability to solve the problem of "three thefts" (theft of antiques, theft of antiques, and theft of antiques).

The so-called "three types of thieves" refer to three types of people who rob tombs, salvage, and steal cultural relics, plus smugglers, sellers of stolen goods, and counterfeiters, forming a black cultural relics industry chain with nearly one million people involved.

From the 1980s to the present, over the past two decades, most of the cultural relics lost by China have come from ancient tombs, hoards, and underwater sites. They are of extremely high historical value. As for the exact number, even the most authoritative national departments would find it difficult to give an accurate answer.

Zhuang Rui had heard Uncle De mention that Uncle De knew a big businessman from Zhejiang whose private museum contained more than 3,000 pieces of ancient porcelain, bronzes, and jade artifacts, almost all of which were unearthed. More than half of these artifacts were acquired through auctions abroad.

These wealthy Chinese have a lack of cultural background. Some of them are Shanxi coal bosses and the earliest traders in old Beijing. Many of them even started their businesses by selling tea eggs at street stalls.

From an entrepreneurial perspective, they are commendable, but their entry into the field of collecting has only made the already murky waters even muddier.

These people are simply treating art as an investment, a new form of investment, just like speculating on stocks or real estate. For example, the prices of Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasty imperial porcelain have

skyrocketed, especially Yuan blue and white porcelain, which is said to have only 300 pieces in existence. Scarcity drives up prices.

However, the claim that only 300 pieces of Yuan blue and white porcelain survive is absurd. Has anyone actually investigated this? What basis did they use to reach this conclusion? According to Professor Meng's analysis, this was actually fabricated by Western capital, auction houses, and blindly following Chinese theorists.

According to Professor Meng's knowledge, some wealthy businessmen in China have more than 300 pieces of Yuan blue and white porcelain. Of course, there may be many fakes among them, but it is undeniable that the figure of 300 pieces given by foreign countries is not that accurate.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, there have been auctions of Qianlong imperial seals at international auctions, with media reports indicating that dozens have been sold. However, according to Professor Meng's highly professional and accurate research, there are no more than 10 Qianlong imperial seals. Could the extra seals have been made by Emperor Qianlong in the ground?

"Forget it, we can't control these things anyway. Let's wait until we have the chance to take over Japan, the US, Britain, Germany, Italy, and Austria..."

Thinking about these things, Zhuang Rui felt utterly dejected. These foreign auction houses exploited Chinese patriotism, constantly presenting so-called national treasures, hoping to get Chinese people to spend exorbitant prices to buy them back. From a commercial perspective, this was understandable, but it severely hurt the feelings of the Chinese people.

"Alright, I've applied for a bidding paddle for you for the auction the day after tomorrow. Go if you want, just don't make any moves. I'll contact some buyers from China in the next couple of days and hopefully convince them..."

Huangfu Yun was also helpless, but this time he successfully used the two samurai swords he had acquired from China as the auction items for this special auction.

The auction house appraiser concluded that they were 15th-century Japanese samurai swords, and the starting bid for both swords together was \$100,000. If they were sold, Huangfu Yun would have his expenses for making a mistake back home reimbursed, and he might even make a profit.

Currently, most collectors in the international sword market are from Europe, America, and Japan. Huangfu Yun has always been secretly pleased that he can fool these bastards with "Made in China" products.

The auction market is now flooded with fakes. Even if a buyer discovers the fakes after bidding, it has nothing to do with Huangfuyun, since the auction house has already authenticated them. Whoever buys them is the one who suffers.

"Zhuang Rui, don't be angry. This has nothing to do with you. When we have money in the future, we'll buy all these things..."

Seeing that Zhuang Rui was still a bit down after Huangfu Yun left, Qin Xuanbing hugged him and comforted him.

"I'm not angry, I'm just feeling really pent up. Anyway, let's not talk about this anymore. Peng Fei and the others will be here soon. Let's have dinner together tonight and go out again tomorrow. You'd better be a good guide..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head, clearing his mind of all the unpleasant thoughts. It was his first time accompanying Qin Xuanbing abroad, so he should just enjoy himself and not let the trouble caused by that spendthrift old woman from over a hundred years ago affect his mood.

Just as Zhuang Rui finished speaking, there was a knock on the door. Zhuang Rui opened the door and saw Peng Fei and a few others. Zhuang Rui waved his hand and said, "Come on, the boss is in a bad mood today. I'll treat you to a big meal!"

Zhuang Rui only treats people when he's in a good mood, a rather peculiar habit that left the people outside the door looking at each other in bewilderment.

"What are you standing there for? Come on, you're free to do whatever you want tomorrow and the day after. We're going to London the day after that..."

Zhuang Rui calmed the white lion that had followed him, shooed it back into the room, closed the door, and changed the room status to "Do Not Disturb." He didn't want to go out for a meal and then have news of a lion appearing in a five-star hotel in the Paris newspapers tomorrow.

This French meal was eaten at the hotel where Zhuang Rui was staying, and it was really not cheap. The appetizers were things like smoked silver carp, oysters, or bread, followed by a thick soup made from a variety of ingredients, then fish, jelly, side dishes, barbecue, salad, and dessert.

Zhuang Rui also got to try the legendary golden snails and foie gras, but he felt they weren't as good as the lamb skewers he had on Wangfujing Street in Beijing at night.

However, this was the most expensive dish. After finishing the meal, the bill came to over 1,600 euros for Zhuang Rui. He simply swiped his 2,000 euro card, paid the tip with the euros he had on him, and then packed some food to take to White Lion.

The next day, the weather in Paris cleared up, and Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing left the hotel early in the morning to head to the Eiffel Tower. This openwork iron tower, which was started in 1889 and is located on the Champ de Mars in Paris, is a technological masterpiece in the history of world architecture and an important tourist attraction and prominent symbol of France and Paris.

Standing at the base of the tower, looking up at the towering iron tower that seems to reach the sky, people appear so small. Zhuang Rui had seen a scaled-down model of the Eiffel Tower at Window of the World in Shenzhen before, but he didn't feel anything then. But now, facing this miraculous building, Zhuang Rui could only marvel at the power and imagination of humankind.

In the Ares Square in front of the Eiffel Tower, there are green spaces and countless fountains. Couples from all over the world are playing happily here. Qin Xuanbing also sheds her usual cold and aloof appearance and keeps taking pictures with Zhuang Rui.

Zhuang Rui looked around for a long time, but he didn't see any domestic newspapers mentioning any indecent nudist behavior here. He guessed it was probably because the weather was too cold.

Qin Xuanbing was very familiar with the sights of Paris. After leaving the Champ de Mars, she took Zhuang Rui to Notre Dame Cathedral.

This Gothic cathedral, described by Victor Hugo as full of poetic charm, is one of the most magnificent buildings in history. It is world-renowned for the sculptures and paintings on the altar, cloisters, doors and windows, as well as the large number of art treasures from the 13th to 17th centuries housed inside.

Stepping inside the church, Zhuang Rui was greatly impressed by the 33-meter-wide dome and the 24-meter-high pillars that reached the roof. The interior of the church was extremely simple, solemn, and dignified, with almost no decorations.

The dome, tens of meters high, shimmered faintly in the dim light, and with religious reverie, it seemed as if heaven was above it.

The third floor of Notre Dame Cathedral, which is also the top floor, is the bell tower described by Victor Hugo. From the bell tower, you can overlook the picturesque scenery of Paris and enjoy the view of the Seine River, where sightseeing boats carry tourists back and forth.

It is said that Victor Hugo once discovered a Greek word inscribed on the wall in a dark corner of the north bell tower of Notre Dame Cathedral: Fate. This word inspired him, and thus, his masterpiece, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, which is as immortal as the cathedral itself, was born.

Chapter 626-627 Antique Shops Abroad

Although he didn't see the Greek words Hugo discovered, nor did he strike the 13-ton bronze bell that Quasimodo rang, the one that shattered his eardrums, Notre Dame Cathedral still evoked a sense of mystery in Zhuang Rui.

After coming down from the clock tower, Zhuang Rui saw a sculpture displayed in a glass case. His expression changed slightly, and he looked at Qin Xuanbing and asked, "Xuanbing, what's the story behind this statue?"

This sculpture depicts the scene of the Virgin Mary holding her dead son in her arms after Jesus Christ was crucified. The Virgin Mary lowers her eyes and looks at Jesus in her arms with infinite sorrow. Her expression is very lifelike. In the hands of the artist, the marble is given life.

What shocked Zhuang Rui was not the expressiveness of the sculpture, but the extremely rich purple spiritual energy he could see inside through the glass. If calculated according to the time period, it should be a work from the 14th or 15th century.

Since Zhuang Rui started paying attention to collecting antiques, he has only dealt with domestic items. Although he had seen foreign oil paintings and luxury goods when he was at Zhonghai Pawnshop, those items did not have any spiritual energy. Even if they did, they were just gemstones.

This sculpture, which is 100% hand-carved, is the first foreign artwork that Zhuang Rui has ever seen that contains spiritual energy. The intensity of the spiritual energy within it is in no way inferior to Zhuang Rui's "Dingguang Sword".

Zhuang Rui came out this time to find out if foreign "antiques" and artworks contained any spiritual energy. Now Zhuang Rui knows that art indeed knows no borders. The value of this sculpture is probably no less than any of his collections.

"Zhuang Rui, you don't know this? This is the crown jewel of Notre Dame Cathedral, Michelangelo's sculpture 'The Sorrow', created when he was 25 years old..."

Qin Xuanbing was somewhat surprised by Zhuang Rui's question, and smiled as she said, "When this work was first created, it caused a huge sensation. People couldn't believe that such an outstanding work could come from the hand of a young man who was only 25 years old."

Therefore, Michelangelo engraved his name on the sash of the Virgin Mary's breast in the sculpture, which is also the only work he ever signed..."

Hearing Qin Xuanbing's words, Zhuang Rui placed his hand on the glass, wishing he could take a hammer and smash it open to carry away the sculpture inside. He guessed that's what the Eight-Nation Alliance did in Beijing back then.

Of course, this was just wishful thinking; those big-nosed French policemen probably wouldn't understand Zhuang Rui's Chinese cultural principle of reciprocity.

After leaving Notre Dame Cathedral, Qin Xuanbing took Zhuang Rui to the Guimet Museum in Paris. Qin Xuanbing had been there before and knew that it had many Chinese artifacts, so she thought Zhuang Rui would like them.

After each person paid six euros to enter the Guimet Museum, Zhuang Rui's expression immediately turned somewhat unpleasant when he saw the first item hanging on the wall.

It was a painting titled "Amitabha's Western Pure Land Transformation." Judging from its style, Zhuang Rui could immediately recognize that it was a product of the Tang Dynasty in Dunhuang, China. Next to it were two masterpieces representing the influence of Tang Dynasty art on the Buddhist community: "Samantabhadra Bodhisattva Riding an Elephant" and "Portrait of a Traveling Monk."

Walking through this museum feels just like being in China, as almost all of the collections originated from China.

The jade carving of the white tiger, placed under the glass cover, depicts a tiger walking sideways above clouds. The lines of its body are engraved in simple and smooth lines, exuding a powerful and mysterious aura. It is clearly a work from the Western Han Dynasty. If it were auctioned in China, it would be worth at least 50 million yuan.

The bronze vessel with double animal ears, four legs, a square base, a missing top cover, a circle of phoenix patterns turning back around its mouth, and a belly composed of interlocking thunder patterns, should, in Zhuang Rui's opinion, be a work from the late Shang Dynasty and a priceless treasure.

Qin Xuanbing, standing beside Zhuang Rui, was unaware that Zhuang Rui felt mostly anger as he looked at these precious cultural relics. The Buddha heads, clearly removed by force, and the enormous "Kangxi Emperor's Southern Inspection Tour" scroll displayed in glass on the wall—the sight made Zhuang Rui's heart ache.

Through his keen observation, Zhuang Rui knew that all these objects were genuine. Needless to say, they were all stolen by those foreign devils who used guns and cannons to force open China's doors back then. Admiring his national treasures in a foreign country, Zhuang Rui felt an indescribable feeling.

In fact, the items here are not only those looted during that catastrophe, but also many that were smuggled out of China by so-called adventurers taking advantage of the internal turmoil and low prices.

Just like that foolish Wang Daoren in Dunhuang back then, who sold 24 boxes of scriptures and 5 boxes of Buddhist paintings to the British-Hungarian Stein just for a mere four horseshoe-shaped silver ingots, which amounted to 200 taels of silver. All that was left behind were the desolate Mogao Grottoes murals.

Seeing some Chinese tourists in the museum pointing at things that belonged to their own country with great excitement, Zhuang Rui cursed the ancestors of those Qing Dynasty men with queues who had committed atrocities back then.

"I'm not watching anymore, it's boring..."

Zhuang Rui was somewhat uninterested. Compared to the many precious Chinese cultural relics displayed in foreign museums, Zhuang Rui preferred that foreign artworks be placed in Chinese museums.

Although China is much more developed than before, its overall national strength is still lacking. If it could flex its muscles more often like the United States, perhaps the so-called "Eight-Nation Alliance" would obediently return the wealth it plundered more than a century ago to China.

"What's wrong, darling? These are all the most precious cultural relics. Don't you like them?"

Qin Xuanbing grew up in Hong Kong and studied abroad for a long time. She knew very little about that period of Chinese history, so she could not understand Zhuang Rui's feelings at this moment.

"They are indeed precious, and I like them very much, but I would prefer them to be kept in a Chinese museum rather than here. This can only mean one thing: these things were stolen by robbers!"

Zhuang Rui was somewhat agitated and spoke loudly, which was heard by many Chinese tourists around them. Everyone's face showed a thoughtful expression. Zhuang Rui's words touched their hearts, and the excited expressions on their faces were no longer there.

"I'm sorry, Rui, I didn't know about these things..."

Seeing Zhuang Rui's excited state, Qin Xuanbing felt somewhat guilty and apologized to him.

"Hehe, this is none of your business. It's alright, let's go..."

Zhuang Rui smiled and put his arm around Qin Xuanbing, placing his right hand on her soft waist, and led her out of the museum.

"By the way, Xuanbing, are there any antique shops in Paris? Like our 'Xuanrui Zhai,' places that specialize in selling old items?"

After leaving the museum, Zhuang Rui had a sudden thought: since his spiritual energy could distinguish foreign artworks, why couldn't he find bargains abroad?

As long as it's a cultural relic, there will always be some hidden gems, and some treasures might be left in the hands of ordinary people. Zhuang Rui's "Dingguang Sword" and that piece of Longkou black pottery were both found in the antique market.

"Antique shops? I really don't know, let me think..."

Qin Xuanbing had never paid attention to these things before. After hearing Zhuang Rui's words, she thought for a while and suddenly said, "I remember now. There seems to be a street in the sixth district that sells all sorts of strange and unusual things. Shall we go take a look?"

After Qin Xuanbing finished speaking, she added, "But Zhuang Rui, I'm not sure if that's an antique shop..."

Zhuang Rui knew he wasn't in a good mood today and that it had affected Qin Xuanbing, so he felt a little embarrassed. He took Qin Xuanbing's hand and said, "It's okay, let's go take a look. We've already been to Notre Dame and the Eiffel Tower, so let's just treat it as shopping..."

The 6th arrondissement of Paris, also known as the Luxembourg arrondissement, is located on the south bank of the Seine-Marne department. It boasts numerous shops, cinemas, theaters, and the expansive Luxembourg Gardens.

The area boasts numerous schools and colleges, including the French Academy of Sciences, the School of Architecture, the School of Dentistry, and the School of Mines, as well as many primary and secondary schools. The Senate building is located within the Luxembourg Gardens, creating a rich cultural atmosphere.

Zhuang Rui and his group are currently in the 16th district. It took them more than half an hour by taxi to find the place Qin Xuanbing had mentioned.

According to the French driver who spoke English, this place is called Furstemberg Street, an extremely quiet street full of Left Bank artistic atmosphere. He didn't know what antiques were, but he knew that there were many things with a long history there.

Walking hand in hand with Qin Xuanbing down this street, which was noticeably less crowded, Zhuang Rui felt that although it wasn't as famous as landmarks like the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe, Notre Dame, or Champs-Élysées, it had its own intellectual and emotional side, exuding a unique Parisian romantic charm.

The streets were lined with shops decorated in a classic style, which suited Zhuang Rui's wishes. He then dragged Qin Xuanbing to browse through each shop.

Qin Xuanbing held up a puppet of Pinocchio with the big nose from "The Adventures of Pinocchio," looked at Zhuang Rui, and said without any attempt to hide her feelings, "Zhuang Rui, this is so cute..."

"purchase!"

Zhuang Rui nodded heavily. He didn't know if coming here was the right or wrong decision, because after browsing around for half a day, most of the items in these shops were just interesting things. Although there were also replicas of Renaissance oil paintings and some artworks, they clearly did not meet Zhuang Rui's requirements.

After browsing for more than an hour, Zhuang Rui hadn't bought anything, but his hands were full of trinkets that Qin Xuanbing had purchased.

"Damn it, why didn't that old bastard Hitler bomb Paris back then?"

After leaving a shop, Zhuang Rui cursed inwardly, "Back then, the Japanese ravaged China, and Hitler also occupied Paris. Why didn't he loot and burn everything?"

Zhuang Rui felt very resentful when he heard the proprietress, whose waist was thicker than a bucket, say that this street was built in 1886 and survived two world wars without suffering any damage.

Compared to Hitler, who had an artistic temperament and a love for beautiful architecture, the Japanese Emperor was simply a piece of trash.

"Zhuang Rui, come look at this house! They have so many Chinese things inside..."

Zhuang Rui, who was no longer interested in shopping, reluctantly followed Qin Xuanbing after hearing her call. He had come here of his own accord, and he couldn't spoil his wife's fun, could he?

"Hmm? It really is..."

Zhuang Rui entered the store and glanced around. The store was quite large, divided into five or six areas. The area at the entrance was filled with Chinese handicrafts. Of course, before Zhuang Rui used his spiritual energy to identify them, these things could only be called handicrafts. You know, "Made in China" is very powerful.

Many tourists who travel abroad see some exquisite handicrafts and plan to buy them to bring back home as souvenirs. However, when they show them off to their friends back home, the English letters "made in China" on the bottom of the handicrafts clearly indicate their origin.

Sure enough, after Zhuang Rui carefully examined them, he found that these things were all exported and then resold domestically. They were either used to fool foreigners who did not understand Chinese

culture or to deal with Chinese people who came abroad to shop. In short, none of the seemingly exquisite items were genuine.

On the other side, there were some medieval European weapons and armor, as well as many spears, halberds, warhammers, battle axes and bows and arrows. However, Zhuang Rui could tell from the patina of these items that they were all modern handicrafts, even without using his spiritual energy.

On both sides of the corridor were closed and locked glass display cases, which displayed many handicrafts of various countries, including Japanese paper fans and lacquerware such as dressing boxes. The paper fans were painted with erotic pictures, which should be the earliest prototype of the Japanese AV industry.

Inside the glass window were various lighters, worn and faded, and even old revolvers and flintlock pistols, all neatly arranged in a row.

Zhuang Rui examined these items carefully, but to his disappointment, what looked like old things were actually modern handicrafts.

Judging from their appearance and patina alone, Zhuang Rui could not tell the age of these items. However, under the observation of spiritual energy, the authenticity of these items was naturally hard to hide. Zhuang Rui did not expect that counterfeiting and piracy were so prevalent in Europe.

At the very back of the shop are some works from the late 12th century Renaissance period. The most eye-catching are, of course, paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael, but it's obvious to anyone with a brain that these are fake.

In addition, below the oil paintings hanging on the wall, there are many clocks that look like they are from the 18th or 19th century, including pocket watches and wall clocks, of various styles, about fifty or sixty in total. Each clock has a small tag indicating its price.

"Hmm? This watch is nice..."

Zhuang Rui pointed to a pocket watch with a silver chain in the glass case and said in English to the middle-aged French man who had been staring at him, "Excuse me, can you understand English? Could you please take that watch out of the glass? I need to take a look at it..."

"Of course I understand, sir. It would be my pleasure to serve you..."

The middle-aged man politely bowed to Zhuang Rui, took out a bunch of keys from his waist, opened the glass cabinet, and took out the pocket watch that Zhuang Rui wanted to see.

This middle-aged man is named Reno. The shop has existed since his great-great-grandfather's generation, almost a century ago. Reno is considered a foreign antique dealer. He noticed Zhuang Rui as soon as he entered the shop; this seemingly young man must be an expert.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's consumption power has greatly increased. Foreign businessmen no longer think that only the Japanese are generous spenders. On the contrary, many foreign businessmen have now learned a few words of Chinese to communicate with those wealthy Chinese customers.

Zhuang Rui had no idea what the middle-aged shop owner was up to; his attention was focused on the pocket watch.

The silver chain on the pocket watch has become somewhat dull and slightly grayish due to oxidation. On the surface of the pocket watch is an enamel filigree figure pattern in red, black and yellow. The figure is dressed in 18th-century gentleman's clothing and looks extremely lifelike.

After Zhuang Rui pressed the mechanism at the top of the pocket watch, the cover popped up. It was very responsive and had not become sluggish over time, indicating that it was well-maintained. Of course, the hands inside had stopped turning, as this was indeed an antique pocket watch.

"Twenty thousand euros?"

Looking at the price on the silver chain, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but frown. He could see with his spiritual energy that although the watch contained spiritual energy, it was only white and not very concentrated. In other words, its value was not very high.

There are also Western watches in China that are not from the Kangxi and Qianlong eras, and their prices are generally around 100,000 RMB. This watch is priced at 20,000 euros, which is a bit beyond Zhuang Rui's expected price. In industry terms, although it is an "obvious" item, it is priced at an astronomical price.

"Can you make this cheaper?"

Zhuang Rui raised the cloisonné enamel watch in his hand and asked Renault.

Renault shrugged and shook his head, saying, "Oh no, sir, this watch was left to me by my grandfather. It's worth at least 20,000 euros, and I really can't offer it any cheaper..."

"Damn it, why does he sound just like those unscrupulous merchants in China? Always talking about ancestors and grandfathers, did this foreigner ever set up a stall in Panjiayuan and receive professional training?"

Upon hearing Renault's English with a French accent, Zhuang Rui cursed inwardly, guessing that this Frenchman was probably a street vendor who had started out as a businessman, a genuine French antique dealer.

"Alright, since it was left to you by your grandfather, a gentleman doesn't take what others cherish, so I won't buy it. You can keep it as a memento of your grandfather..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head and handed the pocket watch to Renault. He was here to find a bargain, not to pick up trash. This thing is only worth about 100,000 yuan in China. Why would he spend 200,000 yuan to buy it abroad? Isn't that crazy?

"Oh, sir, if you really want it, the price is negotiable. I believe my grandfather in heaven would also want what he cherished to find a good home..."

When Renault saw Zhuang Rui return the pocket watch without hesitation, he knew that the price of 20,000 euros had shocked Zhuang Rui. He knew in his heart that although this thing was from the 18th

or 19th century, many of them had been left over in Europe, and the price was actually not very high, only about four or five thousand euros.

"No...no, you can't say that. If your grandfather knew you sold this, he would definitely scold you for being an unfilial grandson..."

Zhuang Rui almost burst out laughing when he heard Renault's words. He was bored out of his mind anyway, and he was also full of anger today, so he decided to make fun of this guy.

Zhuang Rui had heard before that foreigners don't really care about their own family members. If you compliment their mother on her looks and express interest in having a relationship with her beyond friendship, the foreigner might even try to sell you something. Now it seems that this is indeed the case.

Zhuang Rui spoke in English, and Renault couldn't tell that his grandson was swearing. He immediately took out his pocket watch and said, "Ten thousand euros, sir, that's the lowest price..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head. He wasn't really interested in this thing. If he could buy it for 10,000 euros and then buy it for 1 million RMB back in China, Zhuang Rui would consider it. But with a price difference of tens of thousands of RMB, and the possibility of being stuck with it, Zhuang Rui wouldn't do this deal.

Just as he was about to refuse, Zhuang Rui suddenly remembered something and said, "Let's discuss this later. Do you only have these items in your shop? Do you have any older items? Or perhaps some damaged oil paintings or books?"

Zhuang Rui suddenly realized that people often bring antiques to Panjiayuan to buy and sell. This street is like Panjiayuan in Paris. Maybe there are foreigners who can't make a living and are not living a comfortable life who come here to sell their things.

"Oh no, sir, your words are an insult to me. You must know, my shop is the largest art shop in all of Paris, and of course, it has much more than just these items. In the warehouse, there are many, many more valuable goods..."

Perhaps Zhuang Rui's meaning was not clear enough, which made the guy, whose name and appearance were somewhat similar to that of the French actor Jean Reno with his big nose, a little agitated. He started correcting Zhuang Rui's mistakes in a string of words, occasionally throwing in a few French phrases.

"Sir, I think you've misunderstood me. What I meant was, I don't like anything here. If you have something I like in your warehouse, then money... is definitely not a problem..."

When Zhuang Rui heard that the shop also had a warehouse, his eyes lit up. In antique shops in China, good items are never displayed on shelves; they are kept in hidden warehouses or safes. In any case, most of Zhuang Rui's treasures were in the basement.

Zhuang Rui wondered if antique shop owners in France also had this habit.

After explaining his meaning, Zhuang Rui took out a gold card from a famous Swiss bank and waved it at Renault. If the other party knew its value, he would know that the overdraft limit of this card could reach 5 million euros.

Chapter 628 Bronze Mirror (Part 1)

How could anyone doing business in a metropolis like Paris not recognize the gold card in Zhuang Rui's hand? Upon seeing the card, Renault's eyes widened, and his expression became even more respectful.

In recent years, the art market has continued to heat up, but people's eyes have also become more discerning. It is quite difficult to find a sucker in the antique business. When people buy valuable artworks, they usually bring a professional appraiser with them. It is really rare to see an individual like Zhuang Rui who can take out 5 million euros.

This was true both domestically and internationally, which is why Renault's eyes were shining brightly at that moment. He wished that the paintings supposedly by Leonardo da Vinci in his shop were genuine so that Zhuang Rui could buy them.

"Sir, these are all valuable works of art in the shop, and they are quite old. You can take a look at them again..."

"Oh, never mind then, I don't like any of these things..."

After hearing the shop owner's words, Zhuang Rui shook his head in disappointment and prepared to leave with Qin Xuanbing. This was the last shop on the street. It seemed that the grass wasn't always greener on the other side. There was no hope of finding anything good here.

"Oh, sir, please wait a moment..."

Seeing Zhuang Rui walk out with that woman, Renault became anxious. He had only wanted to fool Zhuang Rui a little more and sell a few items in the store. Now that he knew Zhuang Rui was really not interested, he would naturally bring out the good stuff.

"Hmm? Is there something else?"

Zhuang Rui turned to look at Renault with a faint smile on his face. Although he had only been in the industry for a short time, he knew that if this store was really a century-old establishment, then the real stuff would definitely not be displayed in the store.

Renault dared not play any more tricks this time. He bowed slightly to Zhuang Rui and said, "It's like this, esteemed sir and madam, if you have time, I can take you to see some of my grandfather's collection. I guarantee that they are all works of art of great historical value..."

Zhuang Rui nodded and said, "Alright, I hope your grandfather's collection won't disappoint us..."

"Please wait a moment..."

Renault was the only customer in the shop. After letting Zhuang Rui leave, Renault closed the door and led Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing from the quiet street into a nearby alley.

This Renault is a business, so Zhuang Rui wasn't worried about him playing any tricks. He followed him for about five minutes until they arrived at a two-story building.

The buildings here resemble traditional courtyard houses in old Beijing, all in a very old 18th-century architectural style. They are light-structured garden-style mansions, not large, but magnificent and exquisite. Owning such a villa here would probably be quite difficult.

“This was left to me by my grandfather, please come in, gentlemen...”

Renault opened the door and very gentlemanly invited Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing inside.

This was Zhuang Rui's first time entering a foreigner's home. As soon as he entered, he was attracted by the bright colors and delicate decorations. The furniture inside was also very exquisite and somewhat intricate. The cabinet in the corner was even handmade and assembled, which was very eye-catching.

On the walls and ceiling inside the house, there are some murals whose colors have faded somewhat, showing the house's long history.

"Gentlemen, this way..."

Renault beckoned Zhuang Rui and Qin Xuanbing through the living room on the first floor and into the backyard.

"Hmm, the basement?"

When Zhuang Rui arrived at the backyard, his eyes lit up as he saw Renault use a complicated combination lock to open a door, his heart filled with anticipation.

Possibly a World War II shelter, this basement is quite deep, going down seven or eight meters underground. However, there's a wall lamp every meter along the passageway, providing bright lighting, and the ventilation is excellent, so it doesn't feel stuffy.

Upon entering the basement, Zhuang Rui discovered that it was much larger than the basement of his courtyard house in Beijing, probably fifty or sixty square meters, and was divided into two rooms. Each room had a ventilation duct and a dehumidifier that was working.

"Sir, everything here was collected by my father and grandfather. I hope you can find something you like. Madam, please sit here and have a cup of coffee. I have everything here..."

Renault spoke of this place with great pride. He wasn't lying; there was a coffee machine on the wall table near the entrance.

Zhuang Rui shook his head. This foreigner didn't know anything about preserving antiques. The steam from the coffee machine would damage the lifespan of the antiques. But that was someone else's business, and he didn't need to say anything. He nodded, took the white gloves Renault handed him, and walked towards the items piled up in the basement.

The room they were in was quite large, filled with various antique furniture pieces—of course, only foreign antique furniture—with very bright colors, and some small items were placed on top of the furniture.

Renault didn't seem to know much about antiques; the items on the table were just randomly arranged according to their categories, including 17th and 18th century clocks, medieval swords and armor, and even some Chinese bronzes.

However, these items, including the clocks, were mostly covered in rust, which made Zhuang Rui shake his head. Although these things were genuine, the spiritual energy inside was extremely weak, so they were obviously not very valuable for collection.

In fact, Zhuang Rui didn't know that these things were collected by Renault's grandfather over the decades, and some people even came to him to buy them. Renault had these things appraised, but they weren't very valuable. Some of them weren't even worth as much as modern handicrafts. The reason he didn't get rid of them was simply to commemorate his grandfather.

Zhuang Rui just mentioned that he wanted to see things with a long history, so Renault brought him along, though they didn't really have high hopes.

"A Buddha head?!"

Zhuang Rui's gaze, which was looking around, was suddenly drawn to a head that was about the size of a human head. He walked to the table and carefully picked up the Buddha head, which was broken and whose face was almost unrecognizable, with both hands.

The Buddha head is missing an ear. Apart from the eye sockets, nose, and mouth, the face is very blurry. It is called a Buddha head because the head is covered with bumps, just like the Buddha statues Zhuang Rui saw in the temple.

However, the Buddha's head was so badly damaged that it looked as if it had been hammered off from one ear with a blunt instrument. Half of the ear was gone, which made Zhuang Rui's heart ache.

Zhuang Rui knew that many Buddha heads were stolen from ancient sites by Western colonists. If they couldn't move the whole statue, they would cut off the Buddha's head or hands. In many temples in China, the Buddha heads of many Buddha statues were carved and placed on later.

These Buddha heads, along with other looted artworks, were displayed as war booty in the rooms of Western colonists or collectors. If this particular Buddha head hadn't been so badly damaged, it probably wouldn't have remained in this basement.

Renault has been running his shop for many years and often has Chinese customers who are interested in these broken stones that Renault considers to have no artistic value. When he saw Zhuang Rui picking up the stone statue, he immediately stepped forward and asked, "Mr. Zhuang, do you like this stone statue?"

Zhuang Rui nodded, but immediately shook his head and said, "This Buddha head is too damaged. If it were intact, I would have offered 100,000 euros to buy it, but... it's such a pity..."

Zhuang Rui was telling the truth. The Buddha head was so badly damaged that it had lost all its original color. Even if he bought it, it wouldn't have much collectible value.

"Oh, that's such a pity..."

Renault shrugged. He wasn't disappointed that the thing was broken; he was only disappointed that he couldn't make the deal.

"If you can find a complete sculpture like this elsewhere, I'd be willing to buy it..."

Zhuang Rui said somewhat unwillingly, "Those foreign robbers really stole a lot of good things. Renault's family didn't have them, but maybe someone else's family did."

Renault shook his head and said, "Sir, things like this are usually in museums. I don't know who has one at home..."

"Then let's just forget about it..."

Zhuang Rui was somewhat disappointed, but continued searching the items in the basement. These items all contained a trace of spiritual energy, and it was not an easy task for Zhuang Rui to distinguish them one by one.

"Huh? What's this?"

Beneath the Buddha's head, Zhuang Rui saw several rusty, palm-sized bronze artifacts and was momentarily stunned. He had just noticed that one of the bronze artifacts contained a rich purple spiritual energy, but the several iron-like pieces were stacked together, making it impossible for Zhuang Rui to identify which one it was.

"A bronze mirror?!"

When Zhuang Rui separated the items on the table, he could see that these rusty objects were actually four bronze mirrors. However, three of them were so badly corroded that they were missing edges and corners, and the mirror surface no longer showed any trace of bronze.

There was only one bronze mirror, the one Zhuang Rui sensed was rich in spiritual energy. The mirror surface was relatively smooth, but the round edges and back were covered with copper rust. After rubbing it a few times with his hand, the powdery copper rust scattered on the ground.

Because the rust was too thick, Zhuang Rui couldn't see what the pattern on the back was, so he couldn't date the bronze mirror. However, judging from the spiritual energy content, Zhuang Rui knew that this object must be extraordinary, since it was so rusted yet its spiritual energy hadn't been lost much.

"What...what is this?"

After fiddling with the bronze mirror for a while, Zhuang Rui accidentally turned the mirror face up to the light, and a not-so-bright beam of light was reflected onto the wall in front of him.

Chapter 629 Bronze Mirror (Part Two)

While reflecting light, the mirror also had a focusing effect; the beam of light shining on the wall was significantly brighter than the light bulb above his head. However, within that beam, Zhuang Rui vaguely seemed to see something.

Zhuang Rui steadied himself, took a few steps closer to the wall, picked up the mirror, tilted it slightly, and a beam of light was reflected back onto the wall. This time, Zhuang Rui's hand did not move; he could indeed see a trace of influence from that palm-sized beam of light.

Within that beam of light, Zhuang Rui saw a lotus-seated image of Guanyin Bodhisattva. With her hair tied up in a high bun and her robes flowing, Guanyin Bodhisattva sat peacefully on a lotus pedestal, holding a vase, her face kind and compassionate, her eyes slightly closed, displaying an expression of utmost mercy and compassion.

The image wasn't very clear, and just as Zhuang Rui was feeling excited and his hand trembled slightly, the image of Guanyin disappeared.

"This...how is this possible?"

Zhuang Rui exclaimed inwardly, he had never heard of patterns appearing in a bronze mirror before. He hadn't noticed anything when he looked at the mirror just now.

Zhuang Rui immediately turned the bronze mirror over and carefully examined its surface. He found that the mirror was extremely smooth and did not contain any image of Guanyin. However, Zhuang Rui was certain that the image on the wall was not his illusion.

Taking a deep breath, Zhuang Rui calmed himself down and focused on looking at the mirror. As spiritual energy seeped into the bronze mirror, a strange feeling rose in Zhuang Rui's heart.

The moment the spiritual energy entered the mirror, Zhuang Rui felt as if the bronze mirror had come to life. The originally fine grinding texture on the mirror surface was magnified infinitely in Zhuang Rui's eyes.

Zhuang Rui discovered that these textures had subtle differences in depth and light, and it was these differences that caused the image of Guanyin Bodhisattva to appear under the light. Although he had never heard of such a thing before, Zhuang Rui felt that he had discovered an extraordinary treasure.

A bronze mirror is an ancient mirror made of bronze. In ancient times, people used water to reflect their faces. After the invention of bronze, people used bronze basins to hold water to reflect their images.

In pre-Qin works such as the **Shangshu**, **Guoyu**, and **Zhuangzi**, it is mentioned that the ancients "used water as a mirror." The ancient Chinese character "鉴" (jiàn) means "basin," so it can be said that a basin (鉴) for holding water was the earliest form of mirror.

With the advent of alloy technology, bronze mirrors were made using copper and tin or silver and lead from the Yin and Shang dynasties onwards. Bronze mirrors were generally made in round or square shapes, with inscriptions and patterns cast on the back and a knob for attaching them. The front was polished with lead and tin to make it bright and clear for reflecting one's image.

Bronze mirrors from the Shang, Western Zhou, and Spring and Autumn periods have been found sporadically in various archaeological excavations in China, but they became popular and their production increased significantly during the Warring States period.

During the Han Dynasty, due to the high demand in daily life and the rapid economic prosperity after the mid-Western Han Dynasty, the production of bronze mirrors experienced a qualitative leap. The bronze mirrors produced were exquisitely crafted, heavy, and featured a rich variety of inscriptions and

patterns on their backs. This period saw two more peaks of development during the Tang and Song Dynasties.

This practice continued until the Ming and Qing dynasties. With the advent of modern glass, bronze mirrors gradually faded from the historical stage.

In ancient times, bronze mirrors were closely related to people's daily lives. They were indispensable household items and exquisite works of art. The bronze mirrors now collected in some major museums are all well-made, beautiful in shape, gorgeous in patterns, and rich in inscriptions. They are treasures of my country's ancient cultural heritage.

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods were a mature and highly developed period in the history of ancient Chinese bronze mirrors. It was a transitional stage from the rudimentary to the mature stage of ancient Chinese bronze mirrors, and also an important period in which the center of bronze mirror casting began to migrate from the north to the south.

During the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, bronze mirrors experienced rapid and comprehensive development based on the foundations laid by the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. Both the casting techniques and the quantity produced far surpassed previous achievements.

During the Qin and Han dynasties, the number of unearthed bronze mirrors was the largest, and their use was widespread. Han mirrors not only outnumbered those of the Warring States period, but also saw significant development in their production methods and artistic expression.

As for Sui and Tang dynasty bronze mirrors, they saw further development compared to previous dynasties. The tin content was increased in the bronze alloy, giving the mirrors a silvery sheen that was both beautiful and practical.

During the Song, Jin, and Yuan dynasties, the craftsmanship of bronze mirrors did not see any major breakthroughs. Most of them continued the style of the Han and Tang dynasties, with the addition of bronze mirrors featuring historical stories and the like.

In recent years, the number of people collecting bronze mirrors has been increasing, and prices have been rising year by year. It is normal for a Han or Tang dynasty bronze mirror in good condition to fetch a million dollars at auction, while some mirrors with a provenance can fetch tens of millions.

If anyone could find the bronze mirror from the story of the broken mirror being mended, its value would be immeasurable simply because of the story's background.

Based on the history of bronze mirrors, Zhuang Rui could almost certainly conclude that this bronze mirror must be from the Sui and Tang dynasties. The reason is simple: Buddhism was introduced to China after the late Han and Five Dynasties period and developed during the Sui and Tang dynasties.

The effort required to meticulously polish the patterns on a bronze mirror to depict the image of Guanyin Bodhisattva is something that probably no one else, except perhaps during the Sui and Tang dynasties when Buddhism flourished, would have gone to such lengths.

Zhuang Rui simply didn't know how this rare bronze mirror ended up abroad, and why its secret had remained undiscovered for so many years.

"Coming abroad to plunder treasures from their own country..."

Zhuang Rui chuckled self-deprecatingly. Although from the perspective of cultural relic preservation, those Dunhuang scrolls and the bronze mirror in front of him might have been better preserved abroad, since countless cultural relics were reduced to ashes during the ten years of turmoil in China.

However, psychologically speaking, Zhuang Rui would rather have his treasures in foreign museums burned to ashes than see the development of his own country's civilization in other countries, because that would be a silent mockery, a reminder of the humiliation China suffered a century ago.

"What's the price of this piece of metal?"

Zhuang Rui shook his head, pulled himself out of his thoughts, and then held up the bronze mirror to Renault. He was taking advantage of Renault's ignorance of this thing, deliberately calling the bronze mirror a piece of metal.

"Oh no, sir, this is a mirror from your country. In our country, we also have mirrors made of metal, but they are very expensive and definitely not made of iron..."

Zhuang Rui was surprised that Renault knew something about this, but judging from his tone, he didn't know much either. He then said, "Let's just think of it as a mirror, but can you see yourself reflected in it?"

Zhuang Rui's words left Renault speechless. Although the bronze mirror was smooth, it had become somewhat blurry due to oxidation, and could only reflect a person's image at most. It was indeed very different from the metal mirrors made abroad in the 16th and 17th centuries.

To be honest, in foreign countries, the definition of art, apart from calligraphy and painting, emphasizes practical value. This bronze mirror, however, is covered in rust on the back and has a blurry surface. It has neither artistic nor practical value, and it would be beneath the dignity of a room. Renault really couldn't find any words to refute Zhuang Rui.

"Mr. Renault, if you consider it a treasure, then you should keep it for yourself..."

When Zhuang Rui saw Renault standing there, looking hesitant, he threw the bronze mirror in his hand onto the table, not with the mirror facing up, because Zhuang Rui was afraid of damaging the polished patterns on the Guanyin statue.

"2000 euros, if you can offer that price, I'll sell it to you..."

Renault gritted his teeth and said a price that was relatively high in his mind.

"2000 euros?"

Zhuang Rui frowned slightly. 2,000 euros is about 20,000 RMB. Putting aside the mystery in the mirror, the quality of this bronze mirror alone is a bit too expensive.

"Well then, if you could tell me the origin of this bronze mirror, I think I could accept the price of 2,000 euros..."

Zhuang Rui asked this question because he wanted to know the origin of the bronze mirror and see if he could determine its origin from it.

Because this bronze mirror is so rare, being able to grind an image of Guanyin onto its surface without the naked eye is something that is absolutely not something an ordinary person can do.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Renault shook his head and said, "I'm sorry, sir, this item was collected by my grandfather and has always been kept here. However, I seem to recall him mentioning that this stone statue was with the bronze mirror..."

Zhuang Rui was somewhat disappointed. According to Renault, this was very likely something that those bandits had stolen from a temple in China back then, because monks also needed mirrors. Perhaps this thing was made by a skilled craftsman at the request of the monks in the temple.

However, the Buddha head was so badly damaged that Zhuang Rui couldn't find any clues about it. Moreover, with so many temples in China, he had no way of finding out which temple the Buddha head came from.

Shaking his head helplessly, Zhuang Rui took out 2,000 euros from his handbag and handed it to Renault. Then he carefully placed the bronze mirror in his bag and wrapped it with several layers of tissue paper, afraid that the mirror would be damaged.

After the transaction was completed, Renault learned Zhuang Rui's name. Seeing Zhuang Rui constantly examining the Buddha head, he said, "Mr. Zhuang, don't you want this bronze mirror?"

"Oh no, I'm not interested in that, but may I take some pictures? Perhaps I can introduce it to some friends who like it..."

The spiritual energy in that Buddha head was already very weak, and since there was no discernible clue from its appearance, it was practically just a broken stone. Zhuang Rui had no interest in it.

"Mr. Reno, do you not have any oil paintings or other works of art here?"

After spending half a day here, Zhuang Rui felt a little resentful that the items he received were still from his own country.

Chapter 630 Sketch Manuscript (Part 1)

"painting?"

Reno was taken aback by Zhuang Rui's question. Among foreign artworks, besides the sculptures of a few masters, oil paintings are arguably the most valuable in terms of collection and market value.

"Mr. Zhuang, I mainly have modern handicrafts here. I do have some reproductions of oil paintings, I wonder if you would be interested. Of course, I also have some paintings by emerging artists, which are very worth collecting..."

Reno was relatively honest, considering that Zhuang Rui had bought one of his items. He did want to own a painting by a famous artist like Van Gogh, but that was a bit of a pipe dream.

Leaving aside world-renowned painters from the Renaissance period such as Giotto di Bondona, Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, and Raphael Sanzio, even any surviving painting by modern artists like Vincent Willem Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne is worth tens of millions.

If Reno had their works, would he need to work day and night to run this craft shop? He probably would have sold the paintings long ago and taken his wife on a world tour.

"Modern painters? Forget about them..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head upon hearing this. Although many people in the international oil painting market collect works by promising artists, and their value may appreciate in three to five years, Zhuang Rui didn't have that patience. He wasn't collecting for money now.

Zhuang Rui would naturally use that time to hunt for genuine artifacts; he's not running an art gallery or training new talent.

After declining Renault's offer, Zhuang Rui wandered around the basement again. However, although many of the remaining items contained spiritual energy, they were either of poor quality or had very little spiritual energy, and none of them caught Zhuang Rui's eye.

After examining all the items in the room, Zhuang Rui looked at the locked room and asked Renault, "Renault, what's in the other room?"

Although Zhuang Rui had acquired a rare Sui and Tang dynasty bronze mirror today, he was still somewhat dissatisfied. It was from his own country, and Zhuang Rui had come out to hunt for treasures hoping to find a piece of foreign art.

"Oh, those are all my grandfather's belongings. I forgot to tell you. My grandfather was a respected painter, although he wasn't very famous. But my father and I have kept all his paintings. These things aren't for sale..."

Although Renault said he wouldn't sell, he had already unlocked the door with his key and pushed open the door to the small room. By the light from the outside room, Zhuang Rui could see that there were four large metal boxes inside the small room.

"My grandfather knew Picasso back then, though he wasn't as famous as Pablo, and nobody appreciated his paintings..."

When Renault mentioned Picasso, he was quite resentful because his grandfather had a very good relationship with Picasso and was often a guest of Pablo Ruiz Picasso. However, what frustrated Renault was that Picasso painted countless paintings in his lifetime, but his grandfather was unable to collect a single one.

Picasso?!

Zhuang Rui was taken aback when he heard this. That was one of the most creative and influential artists in the contemporary West, and he and his paintings occupy an immortal place in the history of world art.

Picasso's full name is 75 syllables long, which translates to 75 Chinese characters. When Zhuang Rui heard this, he seriously doubted whether Picasso himself could remember his own name. For convenience, people generally refer to him as Picasso.

Picasso was a prolific painter. According to statistics, he produced a total of nearly 37,000 works, including 1,885 oil paintings, 7,089 drawings, 20,000 prints, and 6,121 lithographs.

Picasso's life was exceptionally brilliant. He was the first painter in history to live to see his own work collected by the Louvre Museum—the greatest honor for his 92 years of life.

In a poll conducted by a French newspaper in December 1999, he was voted the greatest painter of the 20th century with 40% of the vote.

Regarding his work, Picasso said, "Every painting of mine contains my blood, and that is the meaning of my paintings."

Of the top 10 most expensive paintings ever sold at auction worldwide, four are by Picasso, with a total value exceeding 2 billion RMB. Although these are only some of his most outstanding works, this demonstrates his significant place in the history of world art.

"Was your grandfather a friend of Picasso?"

Zhuang Rui casually chatted with Renault as he walked into the small room and began to look through some sketches on the table. However, his brows immediately furrowed upon seeing them.

Foreign realist painting is considered slightly more important than abstract painting, and to be honest, Zhuang Rui couldn't tell whether Reno's grandfather's sketches were realist or abstract.

The sketch Zhuang Rui held in his hand looked like a human portrait at first glance, but upon closer inspection, it resembled an animal. Apart from the face being drawn to look slightly like a human, it lacked any other human features.

Although he didn't know much about foreign paintings, Zhuang Rui knew that the level of this sketch was really not very good. He couldn't understand why Picasso was able to be friends with Reno's grandfather.

"Ahem, Mr. Zhuang, although my grandfather's painting skills weren't very good, his appreciation of art was quite high..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Renault blushed slightly and offered a somewhat embarrassed explanation. Zhuang Rui then understood; it turned out that this man's ancestor was someone who was all talk and no action.

Upon seeing this bizarre sketch, Zhuang Rui lost all interest in looking at it. Just as he was about to say something insincere to praise old Renault, who was Picasso's friend, his eyes suddenly fell on a box.

Zhuang Rui has gradually developed a habit: when he sees a large number of collections, he usually scans them with his spiritual energy first, and then examines them one by one according to the thickness of his spiritual energy. Although he is not planning to examine them now, he still habitually glanced at a few boxes.

However, just as his spiritual energy passed through the box closest to him, Zhuang Rui's eyes froze, staring almost blankly at the large metal box.

At this moment, Zhuang Rui completely believed Renault's words. His grandfather must have been a famous art connoisseur and a good friend of Picasso, because Zhuang Rui discovered that in that tin box, there was a thick stack of papers, all of which contained a rich white spiritual energy.

Zhuang Rui didn't know that, besides Picasso, there was no other artist whose paintings could contain so much spiritual energy. Moreover, judging from the colors, objects containing white spiritual energy are generally contemporary or modern artworks.

Suppressing his excitement, Zhuang Rui casually said to Renault, "Uh, Mr. Renault, I believe a good connoisseur must also be an outstanding painter. I think your grandfather just didn't have anyone who knew how to appreciate his work. If you agree, I'd like to see his paintings..."

"Of course I agree, Mr. Zhuang. These boxes are not locked, you are free to browse them, but it would be best to handle them gently. You know, these papers have been stored for decades and are very fragile..."

Renault was delighted to have met someone who appreciated his grandfather. To give Zhuang Rui a better view, he turned on another light, instantly brightening the room.

"Hmm, that's right. Your grandfather must have been a master of abstract art. Oh my goodness, Mr. Reno, why don't you put his paintings up for sale?"

After Zhuang Rui opened the box, he praised it repeatedly. However, after saying these words, Zhuang Rui himself got goosebumps because it was too insincere. It was like telling an old hen that it looked like a phoenix.

"Cough...cough cough, I mainly wanted to keep it as a souvenir..."

Renault, who now runs that art shop, certainly has a good eye for art. He had sorted through his grandfather's paintings before, so he knew his grandfather's skill level. Hearing Zhuang Rui's praise, he couldn't help but feel embarrassed for his grandfather, who was probably in heaven or hell.

"Of course, if I happen to find someone who appreciates these paintings, I might consider selling a portion of them, Mr. Zhuang, just a small part..."

Reno realized he had been too definitive, so he quickly added that his grandfather would have wanted his paintings to be worth money. Didn't the old man often complain that his paintings weren't selling?

"Really? Mr. Reno, if you'd like to sell, I'd like to buy some to study the achievements of French artists in painting and calligraphy..."

Zhuang Rui's surprise at this moment was genuine. He was just thinking about how to persuade Renault to sell the painting in the box, but unexpectedly Renault brought it up himself, saving Zhuang Rui a lot of trouble.

"Of course it's true, but these are all my grandfather's sketches, and they are very precious to me..."

When Renault saw that Zhuang Rui really wanted to buy, he was overjoyed, but his face showed a troubled expression. His thoughts and his expression were completely opposite. This is an essential professional quality for all businessmen, and Renault's performance can definitely be called the best among them.

"Oh, I understand, Mr. Reno. Could you tell me how much a single ticket would be commensurate with your grandfather's status?"

"Your grandfather has no net worth whatsoever," Zhuang Rui said, while cursing inwardly. If it weren't for the items mixed in, he wouldn't have taken these sketches even if they were given to him for free.

While chatting idly with Renault, Zhuang Rui deftly pulled out all the sketches from a large kraft paper envelope and mixed them in with some other manuscripts that actually belonged to old Renault.