

Golden 691

Chapter 691 Fish Dragon

"Those...those really are two pieces of jade?"

"No wonder Teacher Zhuang gave us 100 yuan, but we only took one yuan. It turns out everyone already knew..."

"He's definitely an expert; his eyesight is just different..."

Seeing Zhuang Rui split the jade in two, the crowd began to murmur amongst themselves. While some still harbored doubts, most believed Zhuang Rui had definitely gotten a bargain.

"Dude, aren't you being a bit too flashy?"

Zhuang Rui sensed something was wrong. He hadn't really gotten a feel for it, and if it weren't for his eyes, not only would he not be able to tell what was inside that clod of earth, but even Grandpa Gu would have.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow collectors, could you please let me say a few words first?"

As the saying goes, "People are afraid of becoming famous, just as pigs are afraid of getting fat." If Zhuang Ruizhi were to help people appraise objects, the bigger his reputation would naturally be, the better. However, Zhuang Ruizhi doesn't make a living from that. If he were recognized wherever he went, he wouldn't be able to find any bargains anymore.

After Zhuang Rui spoke, the crowd stirred for a while before gradually calming down. For these people who relied on their hobbies and unorthodox methods, hearing the expert's comments was an opportunity for them to improve.

There are now some experts who are very famous in a certain category of ***, and they often hold lectures on *** knowledge. And it's worth mentioning that the organizers always make a fortune, which

shows that people now have a demand for knowledge in this field, which is still relatively unfamiliar to them.

"Friends, after hearing Brother Li's story of paying tuition for being blinded, I've been thinking about something. People say that those in the same trade are enemies, and meeting in person makes you enemies. But I think that if we want to improve in the game, the most important thing is communication."

This guy, Brother Li, shared his experience of being scammed with everyone, hoping to prevent other friends from making the same mistake. That's why I decided to buy a few stones. I really didn't mean anything by it; I just picked these two because they looked nice to me.

"You probably don't really believe I can see through these clods of dirt and tell whether it's jade or glass inside, right?"

The object in Zhuang Rui's hand was certainly not glass. He said that simply to divert everyone's attention from what he had bought.

"Teacher Zhuang is right. If everyone keeps their mistakes to themselves and doesn't talk about it, then who knows, someone else might make the same mistake next time..."

"Yes, Professor Zhuang's level of expertise is different from ours. Otherwise, how could he be an expert..."

For a moment, those who had been intentionally or unintentionally mocking Old Li looked somewhat embarrassed, while the tourists began to discuss among themselves.

To be honest, not everyone who plays this game is open-minded. They get jealous when others make a bargain, and happy when others make a mistake. Zhuang Rui's words have indeed made many people reflect.

"Teacher Zhuang, what you said is true, we should all reflect on ourselves. But Teacher Zhuang, the item you picked out doesn't seem to be made of glass. Could you clean it and let us all take a look?"

Suddenly, a voice rang out from the crowd; it was Old Qi, the jade connoisseur.

"Yes, let us see..."

"Yes, yes, it's rare to see an expert take action. Let us see what kind of object it is..."

As soon as Lao Qi said this, everyone agreed.

"Damn it, they just want me to show off, don't they?"

Zhuang Rui felt a little frustrated. It turned out that all his words were for nothing, and in the end, it all came down to these two pieces of jade.

Zhuang Rui could also guess what Old Qi was thinking. Old Qi just wanted to embarrass himself.

Zhuang Rui, also involved in jade collecting, is a director of the National Jade Association and is popularly known as the "Jade King of the North." He has many acquaintances and is considered a well-known figure in the industry.

Old Qi, on the other hand, was only famous in Zhengzhou's antique circle for his expertise in identifying jade. The difference in reputation between the two was enormous.

If, at Lao Qi's urging, it turns out that Zhuang Rui was wrong today, it will definitely cause a sensation in Zhengzhou's antique circle, and Lao Qi's reputation will naturally rise accordingly.

What do you call this? This is called climbing over experts to get ahead. Although he's not as famous as Zhuang Rui, Lao Qi is also thinking that the younger generation will surpass the older generation, and the older generation will die on the beach.

"Alright, let's take this friend's good wishes and see what these two objects are..."

Seeing everyone's reaction, Zhuang Rui knew that if he didn't show off a bit today, he wouldn't be able to leave this antique market. Wasn't this forcing him to show off a bit?

Among the onlookers, some were quite perceptive. One of them quickly brought over a plate of water and a small plate of pork ribs, placing them on the counter in front of Zhuang Rui.

Zhuang Rui didn't say much. He simply threw the two jade pieces into the dish, rubbed them with his hands, and began to clean them. In the blink of an eye, the clear water in the dish turned murky.

Zhuang Rui did not take out the jade piece, so the onlookers could not see what was inside.

"It's jade, it really is jade..."

"It should be jade, but when it was made is hard to say..."

"Yes, newly carved jade objects are worthless..."

"That's right, if you could find a bargain just by randomly touching a couple of items, that would be too amazing, wouldn't it?"

Zhuang Rui held a jade piece in each hand, one thumb and one forefinger, and lifted them out of the basin. Everyone's eyes were drawn to Zhuang Rui's hands, where the two pure white jade pieces with a slight bluish tinge were displayed before them.

Everyone could clearly see that these were two curved jade pieces, each about five or six centimeters long and two centimeters wide. They looked quite thick from a distance, but what exactly they were would only be known once they handled them.

"Teacher Zhuang, could you please take a look at this for me...?"

Old Qi in the crowd was stunned for a moment. He didn't expect that the two items Zhuang Rui casually picked out were actually jade. However, at this moment, Old Qi still thought that even if they were jade, they were probably made from scraps of jade.

"No problem, please take a look..."

Zhuang Rui glanced at Lao Qi, but instead of handing over the jade in his hand, he gently placed it on the glass cabinet in front of him. This action stirred the hearts of some of the experts watching.

There are certain rules to follow when handling antiques. For antiques like jade and porcelain, if the owner considers these items to be valuable, they will usually place them on a table for others to take themselves when having them appraised, rather than handing them over personally. This is because if something goes wrong, it would be difficult to determine responsibility.

Zhuang Rui's act of placing the jade pieces on the table indicates that he values these two items highly. If they were just cheap, low-quality goods, he would never have treated them with such care.

"This...this thing?"

Seeing Zhuang Rui's seriousness, Lao Qi's expression also became solemn. He carefully picked up a jade piece from the counter and examined it closely. Everyone could clearly see a hint of surprise on his face.

"Old Qi, is it ancient jade?"

"They look like two jade fish..."

"Not necessarily, it could be a jade dragon pendant..."

"Old Qi, hurry up and tell us..."

Zhuang Rui held one jade piece in his hand, while Lao Qi held the other. The onlookers gradually grew impatient and called for Lao Qi to share his insights.

"I can't say for sure about this. It's real jade, and it should be a fairly good quality Hetian jade, but whether it's a modern imitation or antique jade, I can't say. Let's ask Teacher Zhuang to answer that for us..."

Although Lao Qi said he couldn't tell, his eyes betrayed his true feelings. When he handed the jade piece back to Zhuang Rui, the reluctance he showed was so obvious that even a blind man could tell that the jade piece was no ordinary item.

Just as everyone expected, although Lao Qi didn't know much about this type of jade piece, judging from the quality of the jade and the patina around the edges, it was definitely an ancient piece of jade.

Moreover, the slightly yellowish patina and the somewhat rough feel indicate that this item was not unearthed for very long, and at least it has not been handled or played with by anyone.

"Teacher Qi is too modest. This is a very common piece of ancient jade, called a jade dragon. Judging from its shape, it's from the late Yin Dynasty. The jade quality is also quite good. Although it doesn't meet the standard of mutton fat jade, it's still above average Hetian jade..."

Before Zhuang Rui finished speaking, a huge gasp was heard in the room. A piece of ancient jade from the Yin Dynasty made of top-quality Hetian jade would have a market price of at least 300,000 yuan. This is an incredible bargain!

"Professor Zhuang...you...you're not seeing things?"

Old Li was the one who asked the question. At that moment, he was filled with mixed feelings. Zhuang Rui's words were like a seasoning, bringing a mix of emotions to his heart.

Zhuang Rui glanced at Lao Li, feeling a little embarrassed. Lao Li had spent 20,000 yuan, and these were the only two valuable items he had picked out.

"Brother Li, you shouldn't be mistaken. Although the carvings of these two jade dragons are simple, their shapes are extremely beautiful. The fish and the dragon are closely related to some of our ancient legends or stories."

According to historical records, there was a legend of jade dragons exchanging objects as early as the Yangshao culture period of primitive society. However, based on the unearthed artifacts, the objects transformed by the jade dragons only appeared in the Tang Dynasty, and the fish was called the Makara fish.

This Capricorn fish has a fish-like body but horns on its head. As everyone knows, horns have always been considered a characteristic of dragons, so people also call the Capricorn fish a "fish-dragon". The story of the carp leaping over the dragon gate comes from this.

These two fish-dragon jade pieces date back to a period far earlier than the Tang Dynasty. This means that physical artifacts depicting fish-dragon transformations already existed during the Yin and Shang Dynasties. In other words, the appearance of this pair of fish-dragon jade pieces fills a gap in Chinese jade culture for a particular period...

Zhuang Rui's words caused an uproar. The cultural value represented by cultural relics that can fill certain historical gaps far exceeds their intrinsic value.

Chapter 692 Only In, No Out

What are they playing at? They're playing with culture!

The reason why listed antiques are valuable is because they have a clear provenance, are historical artifacts, possess unique stories and backgrounds, and can be studied, verified, and analyzed.

Imagine the objects you hold in your hands, perhaps once used by a famous historical figure. That feeling would definitely make you feel elated, though outsiders can't understand it.

The same two items, if used by Emperor Qianlong, would certainly be more valuable than those used by ordinary people.

As mentioned earlier, there was a story about a young man who applied for a job at an antique shop. He brought a broken piece of wood and claimed it was Emperor Qianlong's toothpick. The shopkeeper immediately hired him. Although this is a joke, it also illustrates the importance of inheritance.

Although the fish-dragon in Zhuang Rui's possession is not recorded in any literature, if it is indeed an ancient jade artifact from the Yin-Shang period that has transformed into a fish-dragon, as he claims, then its value is probably not just a matter of hundreds of thousands.

Just as everyone was still processing Zhuang Rui's words, Zhuang Rui continued, "As everyone knows, there was no such thing as a carp leaping over the dragon gate during the Yin and Shang dynasties. However, these two objects prove that in that era, there was a story of a fish transforming into a dragon, which carries the auspicious meaning of rising to the top in one step and being promoted in no time."

In my personal opinion, these things are closely related to the history and culture of that time. As you can see, the shape of this dragon-shaped jade is very similar to the character for dragon in oracle bone script.

Therefore, I assert that these two fish-dragon jade pieces are cultural artifacts from the Yin-Shang period, or more precisely, typical cultural representatives of the late Shang Dynasty.

The discovery of these two jade pieces can supplement the existing knowledge of artifacts unearthed from the Yin-Shang culture, and their cultural value is extremely high..."

In Zhuang Rui's eyes, although these two pieces of jade had not been polished, the rich purple-gold spiritual energy inside was comparable to that of the "Dingguang Sword," and their ages should be similar.

And indeed, as Zhuang Rui said, the value of these two pieces of jade lies not in the jade itself, but in the cultural background they embody. This is precisely why Zhuang Rui values these two pieces of jade.

Once there are more ancient jade artifacts in the future, these two pieces of jade will definitely become one of the most prized treasures in the jade and miscellaneous items museum, along with the Western Han Dynasty "White Jade Tiger".

"I've learned so much today, I've really learned something new..."

"That's right, to be able to glean so much knowledge from a single piece of jade, Professor Zhuang truly deserves his reputation as an expert who has appeared on CCTV..."

"This is just good luck, damn it, why don't I have this kind of luck..."

"You? Weren't you the loudest one jeering just now?"

"Old Qi, how about it? Are you convinced now?"

"Teacher Zhuang, could you tell me how much these two pieces of jade are worth?"

There was a mix of chatter in the crowd, and finally someone loudly asked Zhuang Rui about the price. Most of the people present were jade sellers, along with some regular customers who had come to Taobao. They immediately perked up their ears, eager to hear Zhuang Rui's quote.

Although the value of an object cannot be measured entirely in monetary terms, money is always the most direct way to measure the value of an object.

If these two pieces of fish-dragon jade are only worth ten or eight yuan, then let alone ancient jade from the Yin and Shang dynasties, even if it were worn by the Yellow Emperor, probably no one would give them a second glance. This is the market theory.

"Hehe, we're all in the know. If we're just pricing this thing based on its jade quality and age, it should be around 200,000 yuan. It might go up a bit more at auction."

However, as everyone knows, when it comes to antiques, it's a matter of personal taste. If someone really likes it, they might offer a very high price...

Wow, it's so tall!

"You don't know anything, Teacher Zhuang is just underestimating the situation..."

"Yeah, if this were to go to auction, you wouldn't even dream of it without a million..."

"Old Li has suffered a huge loss this time; he's given away the treasure he had just gotten his hands on..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's offer, the crowd began to discuss it. Some tourists, who were simply there for tourism, exclaimed in amazement, only to be dismissed by some experts. Perhaps Zhuang Rui's words would inspire many more people to enter the antique business.

As for Old Li, the original owner of these two items, he was ashen-faced. He couldn't believe that out of the seventy or eighty items, he had cleaned forty or fifty of them, so why hadn't he found these two?

The price Zhuang Rui quoted was like a heavy hammer blow to Lao Li's chest. Lao Li couldn't catch his breath and just wanted to shout to vent his frustration.

In fact, Zhuang Rui was quite kind. In order not to hurt Lao Li too much, he had already lowered the price of the two pieces of jade. Even if sold individually, each piece of jade would be worth more than 1 million RMB. However, since the two jade dragons are a pair, their price would increase many times over.

At last year's Hanhai Auction, a fish-dragon jade pendant from the Warring States period, which was not as good as these two in terms of appearance and jade quality, was still auctioned off for a high price of 1.3 million RMB. Not to mention Zhuang Rui's two ancient jade pieces with their unique historical and cultural background.

"Teacher Zhuang, are you selling these two pieces of jade?"

"Yes, Professor Zhuang, if you're willing to sell, I'll offer 300,000 for each piece..."

"Old Wang, trying to take advantage again, aren't you? Three hundred thousand, I'll take as much as you have..."

"Teacher Zhuang, I'll offer 1 million, please spare one for me..."

"Teacher Zhuang, how about two items for 3.5 million? Can I have them?"

Don't let the unassuming appearance of these stall owners fool you; many of them are quite wealthy. They quickly raised the price to 3.5 million, a price already comparable to auction prices. Of course, the auction market is unpredictable, and the price could potentially go even higher. →

However, as soon as the price of 3.5 million was announced, the scene fell silent, and everyone's eyes were focused on the bidder and Zhuang Rui.

"Mr. Zhuang, my surname is Qiao. My family has always loved antique jade, and I'd like to buy some as a gift for my elders. Would you be willing to part with them?"

The man speaking was in his thirties, dressed in a suit and tie despite the hot weather. He spoke very politely and seemed to be a person of status.

Zhuang Rui smiled upon hearing this, carefully handed the two pieces of jade to Peng Fei, and then said, "Mr. Qiao, friends, I'm really sorry, but I won't sell these two items. Recently, I've been preparing to open an antique museum in *** to promote Chinese culture, for friends in the industry and those who love *** to visit and exchange ideas."

I'm like a Pixiu now, only taking in and never giving out. I desperately need these items. If anyone has anything they're no longer interested in, they can exchange it with me, let's share what we have..."

Zhuang Rui's words elicited a burst of laughter. Those who had previously looked down on Zhuang Rui because of his age adjusted their attitudes and began to look at him differently.

There are some well-known collectors in this antique market, but compared to Zhuang Rui, they are far inferior. To be able to open a private museum, one must not only have abundant financial resources, but also a vast network of connections and relationships in the antique industry.

It can be said that although they are all from the same industry, the people in the room are no longer on the same level as Zhuang Rui.

"Teacher Zhuang, I have a jade Pixiu in my home. Would you be interested?"

"Teacher Zhuang, my family has a painting by Huang Tingjian passed down through generations. Could you please take a look at it?"

"Hey, Professor Zhuang, this is something I received a while ago. Could you tell me its provenance?"

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, everyone began to make a fuss. Some asked Zhuang Rui to help them appraise their treasures, while others wanted to sell their items. In an instant, the first floor of the antique market turned into a bustling marketplace. Even the people on the second and third floors were alerted, and more and more people gathered around.

Zhuang Rui was stunned by the scene. He had only wanted to give up on his museum, which hadn't even opened yet, but he didn't expect it to cause such a stir. Even the tall and burly security guards were having trouble keeping the crowd in check.

"Mr. Zhuang, I am Zhang Li, the manager of this antique market. I am very glad that you could come here, but it is a bit messy here. Can we talk somewhere else?"

Just as Zhuang Rui was getting dizzy from the noise of the people around him, a middle-aged man in his forties squeezed next to him. Although the antique market was well-air-conditioned, the man's forehead was still covered in sweat, and he seemed to be stunned by the scene as well.

"Okay, okay, let's talk somewhere else..."

Seeing that the people in front of him were about to lose control again, Zhuang Rui couldn't bother promoting his museum anymore. Surrounded by several security guards, he headed towards his office.

However, there were just too many people surrounding them, and many of them genuinely wanted Zhuang Rui to appraise the treasure and were unwilling to give in, so even after walking for several minutes, they still couldn't break through the crowd.

It's important to know that getting an expert to conduct an appraisal costs a considerable amount of money. If an appraisal certificate is required, the price will be even higher, ranging from thousands to tens of thousands of yuan. Most people are unwilling to spend this money, but now that a top expert is in front of them, no one wants to give up this opportunity.

Seeing that he couldn't squeeze out, Manager Zhang simply climbed onto a counter and shouted loudly, "Ladies and gentlemen, we're all in the same industry. We're into culture, so don't let Teacher Zhuang laugh at us. How about this, if any of you have any items at home, go home and get them right now."

"Professor Zhuang is visiting our antique market, and he definitely won't be leaving anytime soon. Everyone, please line up later. How about we invite Professor Zhuang to do an on-site appraisal of the treasures?"

"Okay, I wonder if Teacher Zhuang would be willing?"

"That's right? Manager Zhang, if Teacher Zhuang leaves, will you be the one to make the assessment?"

"Yes, let Teacher Zhuang say if it's okay. If it is (Henan dialect, meaning whether it's acceptable or not), I'll go home to get my things..."

To Zhang Li's surprise, this tenant, whom he was usually quite familiar with, was now refusing to cooperate. Manager Zhang, standing at the counter, was turning red and white in turns, unsure whether Zhuang Rui would agree.

Seeing Manager Zhang's pleading expression, Zhuang Rui felt a little helpless. Even browsing the antique market could lead to trouble. However, considering the great bargain he'd found today, and since he had nothing else to do in the afternoon, Zhuang Rui nodded and said, "Let's do as Manager Zhang says. But don't bring too many things. I'll only look at one item per person. Friends, bring some good quality, more refined pieces..."

Zhuang Rui fears that if everyone brings all their ceramic jars without thinking twice, they might not be able to finish looking at them in an afternoon, or even a week.

The number of people who play *** in Zhengzhou is not necessarily less than those in ***, because the surrounding cities have a much deeper history. Luoyang and Kaifeng, for example, have histories that are longer than those of ***.

"Okay, everyone make way. Teacher Zhuang has agreed, so let Teacher Zhuang go and rest first..."

"Yes...yes, make way, make way quickly..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's agreement, cheers erupted from the crowd. The demands of the masses are actually quite easy to meet, and some people had already begun to take the initiative to maintain order.

Some shrewd people turned around and left. The sooner they got their things back, the sooner Zhuang Rui could see them. Otherwise, with at least several hundred people in the venue, how long would it take to get in line?

In an instant, those with cars drove, and those without hailed taxis. Whether they were stall owners or regular customers browsing, they all flocked out of the antique market. Anyone who didn't know better might have thought the antique market had been bombed.

"Old Li, are you still selling the rest of your jade?"

The people who hadn't yet left the antique market were now eyeing Old Li, who was standing there dumbfounded. Among these unwashed items were two pieces of ancient jade from the Shang Dynasty; who knew there might be some good stuff inside.

"Selling! This stuff isn't rightfully mine, Old Li's, but the rest, 500 yuan each, take it or leave it..."

Old Li was pondering how this, which was clearly a "landmine" scam, could produce two genuine victims. After thinking for a long time, Old Li concluded that it was because his fate was unlucky and money never seemed to stick with him.

Old Li had sold the items in full view of everyone, so he didn't have the face to go back on his word. He was just being stubborn. Hundreds of thousands of yuan worth of goods had already been picked up by

someone else, so he didn't care about the remaining thirty or so yuan. However, the price had increased tenfold, from fifty to five hundred.

"Hey, Lao Li, you're fucking heartless!"

"Yeah, Lao Li, give me a discount, 100 yuan each, I'll buy a few to play with..."

Those who remained were mostly stall owners whose stalls were unattended. Upon hearing Old Li's words, they all laughed and cursed.

"500 each, take it or leave it. I, Old Li, don't have that kind of luck. Who knows, maybe one of you will win the grand prize..." Old Li stubbornly refused to budge.

"Okay, give me one..."

"I want one too..."

"Old Li, you're a damn skinflint! I want four, wait, I'll pick them myself..."

Although everyone was cursing loudly, they didn't stop. In the blink of an eye, Old Li's remaining thirty-odd "ancient jade" pieces, covered in mud, were all sold out.

Chapter 693-694 Mountain Dwelling Picture

Old Li had 36 pieces of "ancient jade" left, but in less than five minutes, they were all snatched up by tourists and other stall owners.

At 500 yuan each, honestly, it's not expensive at all. Let alone antique jade, even good quality new jade would cost over a thousand yuan. If you happen to find something like the one that Teacher Zhuang found, you'll make a fortune.

Old Li counted the stack of banknotes in his hand and found that it amounted to 18,000 yuan. He had almost earned back the money he had been cheated out of by the "farmer" who "planted landmines".

Now, Old Li is also a little confused about whether he has been scammed or whether the person was really just an honest farmer. Logically speaking, the person who set this trap should have some discernment, so they wouldn't have confused ancient Shang Dynasty jade with these fakes, right?

This can only mean that Old Li was incredibly unlucky, while Zhuang Rui was incredibly lucky. The ancient jade from the Yin Shang Dynasty that originally belonged to him was somehow snatched away by Zhuang Rui.

The "props" used by the swindler were actually purchased in bulk from an antique market in another city. Some of the jade inside was simply wrapped in clods of earth.

The "farmer's" profession was swindling, not jade appraisal. He was busy mixing these items with mud to make them look fake, and didn't realize that these "props" actually contained two pieces of ancient jade from the Yin and Shang dynasties.

Although the probability of such things is relatively low, they are still heard of from time to time in the antique market. In places where wealthy families have lived or where ancient tombs are concentrated, people often go there to hunt for items. Over time, the locals have become shrewd and know how to buy fakes to fool those city dwellers who think they are smart.

There was once a guy from Beijing who went to Hebei to search for old houses. He had a good eye and picked out seven or eight arrows with inscriptions from a pile of dilapidated modern bronze artifacts. When he returned to Beijing, they were identified as Qin Dynasty arrows, and he made a profit of seventy or eighty thousand yuan by reselling them.

Therefore, in the antique trade, what matters most is having a discerning eye; otherwise, even if a treasure is placed in front of you, you might just miss it and not recognize it.

"Old Zhao, why are you wrapping it up so tightly? If you bought something good, you should share it with the brothers..."

After counting the money, Old Li turned around and saw Old Zhao, who had been the loudest critic but had bought the most, returning from the restroom. Without asking, he must have used the tap there to clean the jade.

"Get lost, damn it, it's just a piece of Kunlun jade, it's worthless, damn it, are you doing this on purpose?"

When Lao Zhao heard Lao Li's words, he was immediately furious. He had just spent 2,000 yuan to buy four pieces of jade. Who knew that after careful selection, he found that one piece of jade was genuine, but the workmanship was rough and the jade quality was poor. It was worth at most 20 yuan. In the blink of an eye, he lost 1,980 yuan. How could Lao Zhao be in a good mood?

"Yeah, Lao Li, are you doing this on purpose?"

"Old Li, this isn't jade at all! It's just plastic..."

"Old Li, pay up! Damn it, I spent 1500 yuan on three pieces of glass, and I don't know what my wife will do when I get home..."

The people who went to clean the jade have all returned, their faces grim. They had originally hoped to get a bargain and try their luck, but it turned out that apart from Old Zhao's piece of jade, the others had absolutely nothing to do with jade.

This inevitably raises suspicions that Lao Li is shifting the risk, using everyone's money to cover the 20,000 yuan he lost. Indeed, the amount of cash Lao Li holds in his hand is enough to prove that he has basically not lost much money now.

"Hey...hey, everyone, I may not have touched these things, but think about it, I can't just throw in two pieces of ancient jade worth hundreds of thousands to set a trap, can I?"

Besides, do you think I have that much influence to invite Teacher Zhuang to set a trap for you all? Damn it, if I were just a little more diligent, those two pieces of jade would be mine..."

Old Li originally wanted to explain, but as he spoke, his temper flared up, and he wanted to slap himself a few times. He said, "I've already spent forty or fifty yuan wiping and cleaning it. Why couldn't I keep going?"

Hearing Old Li's explanation, everyone felt relieved. They had only spent a thousand or two yuan on a fake, while Old Li had personally thrown away millions. If anyone felt aggrieved, it was Old Li more aggrieved than anyone else.

By comparing themselves to Old Li's misfortune, everyone easily found a balance. Several "kind-hearted" people even offered words of comfort to Old Li. Of course, whether they were sincere or gloating was another matter.

"Teacher Zhuang, you see, I made this decision without your permission, I'm really sorry..."

Zhuang Rui followed Manager Zhang and was now sitting in the manager's office of the antique market. The air conditioning here was stronger than outside, and there was much less sweat on Manager Zhang's forehead.

"It's alright, it's alright, Manager Zhang, just call me Xiao Zhuang. I'd also like to see the collections of collectors in Zhengzhou, it would be good for us to exchange experiences..."

Zhuang Rui took the water poured by Manager Zhang and politely said a few words of humility. He was going to open a museum in the future, and he would inevitably have to communicate with collectors from all over the country. He would just consider Zhengzhou as the first stop.

Besides, given the situation just now, if he hadn't agreed, he'd probably still be stuck on the first floor of the antique market.

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Manager Zhang waved his hands repeatedly and said, "I wouldn't dare accept that. You are a nationally renowned expert, you must call me 'Teacher Zhuang.' Please have a seat, I'll be right back..."

Zhuang Rui smiled and said, "Manager Zhang, please make yourself at home..."

After leaving the manager's office, Zhang Li immediately took out his phone and made a call.

"Hey, big brother, hurry up and bring that Kangxi blue and white porcelain piece from home, and that little box I hid under the bed, bring them both here too. Yes, yes, to the antique market..."

It turns out that Manager Zhang also had his own selfish motives. His brother, Zhang Feng, is also a well-known collector in Zhengzhou. His family has acquired many old items over the years, but given their professional expertise, they cannot determine the age of many of these items.

Zhuang Rui is currently sitting in his own office, so Manager Zhang naturally has the advantage of being in a good position.

While Zhang Li was on the phone outside, Zhuang Rui in the office also received a call.

"Mr. Ren, didn't you say you'd look at something tomorrow? What? Now?"

"Mr. Ren, I'm really tied up right now. I'm at the Zhengzhou Antique Market, and I was just surrounded by a bunch of people wanting my items appraised. Why don't you come over and we can have lunch together?"

The call was from Yu Zhenping. For some reason, he suddenly wanted to meet with Zhuang Rui. Zhuang Rui didn't understand Yu Zhenping's intentions, but he still told him the truth and explained his situation.

"Oh, never mind then, I'll call Mr. Zhuang again tomorrow..."

Yu Zhenping licked his lips. He hadn't eaten meat for almost half a month. He wanted to accept Zhuang Rui's invitation, but after thinking it over, he decided that safety came first and declined Zhuang Rui's invitation.

However, after hanging up the phone, Yu Zhenping immediately stood up, dressed himself up, and hurriedly left his hiding place.

Sitting in the manager's office, Zhuang Rui thought for a moment, then took out another phone and sent a text message to Jiang Hao, explaining the situation and that he would not act on his own this time, and that Jiang Hao should not try to pin the blame on his friend if there were any problems.

"Manager Zhang, Manager Zhang, is Teacher Zhuang here? Oh dear, am I the first one here?"

Zhuang Rui was drinking tea and chatting in his office when the door to the manager's office was pushed open from the outside. Old Qi, who had just been there, rushed in like the wind, holding a scroll in his hand. His clothes were completely soaked with sweat.

"Hey, Lao Qi, you're into ancient jade, what brings you a painting? You must have a lot of good stuff hidden away at home..."

Zhang Li was familiar with all the tenants in the antique market, and he immediately started joking with Lao Qi.

"Manager Zhang, don't mention it. I'm afraid your boss will be here soon, right?"

Old Qi was no longer the same person who had made things difficult for Zhuang Rui at the antique market. He realized that others had already opened private museums, which he couldn't compare to at all. He should just honestly save on the appraisal fee.

However, Lao Qi is no pushover either. If Zhuang Rui wants to be convinced, he'll need to demonstrate some real skill. At the very least, the painting he brought for appraisal today is rather obscure.

Zhang Li's office is quite modern, with a glass coffee table and a large executive desk, which is not very suitable for appraising objects. He immediately called a few security guards to move an antique-style imitation rosewood long table from the wood crafts area on the first floor, moved the large executive desk, and placed it in the center of the room.

"Old Qi, you're really fast, aren't you..."

"Old Yu, you're not slow either. What are you holding in your hand?"

"Hey, you guys are all here?"

As they spoke, the people who had just left the antique market gathered together again. Not only was the office full of people, but the corridor outside was also crowded with collectors who came for appraisal.

Moreover, this number is far greater than the number of people who just left. These days, who doesn't have a few relatives and friends?

Especially among collectors, almost everyone has their own small circle. The news of experts providing free appraisals has long been known throughout Zhengzhou's antique circles, and everyone in Zhengzhou is eagerly rushing over.

"Ahem, everyone, please be quiet for a moment. We are fortunate to have Mr. Zhuang as our guest today, so shouldn't we give him a warm welcome?"

Zhang Li suddenly found a megaphone from somewhere, stood at the door of the room, and shouted loudly. Although there were many people, those who entered the room were all well-known figures in Zhengzhou's antique circle.

Other collectors, however, "voluntarily" formed long queues. There was no way around it; for those who didn't, the security guards immediately pointed their electric batons at them.

"Alright, I won't take up any more of your time. Let's have Teacher Qingzhuang begin the assessment now..."

After the applause, Manager Zhang wisely put away the megaphone and plopped down next to Zhuang Rui. Being able to observe an expert appraising treasures was a learning opportunity for him.

"Mr. Zhuang, could you please take a look at this painting..."

Old Qi was the first to arrive, and naturally the first to come up for appraisal. At this moment, Old Qi had already put away his airs as a "jade expert" and very respectfully placed the painting in his hand in front of Zhuang Rui.

"Where did you get this item from?"

Zhuang Rui had already used his spiritual energy to observe the scroll in Lao Qi's hand when Lao Qi entered the room. He discovered that it contained extremely rich white spiritual energy, indicating that it was the work of a modern master.

"Hehe, I traded it with an old friend when I went to Shanghai a few years ago. I don't know much about landscape paintings, so I'm showing it to Teacher Zhuang to see if it's an authentic work by Mr. Xiao Junxian?"

Old Qi smiled and took out the painting. Firstly, he had bought it for 20,000 yuan and wanted to verify its authenticity. Secondly, he also wanted to use the painting to investigate Zhuang Rui's intentions.

Although Xiao Junxian was a famous painter in modern times, his name was not as well-known as Zhang Daqian, Xu Beihong and Qi Baishi. People who are not professional painters or calligraphers may not have even heard of him.

Zhuang Rui nodded after hearing Lao Qi's words, his face expressionless, but he was secretly amused.

Zhuang Rui knew his weakness was his limited knowledge of the provenance and origin of artifacts. So he came up with a clumsy method: he memorized the biographies and artistic styles of many famous figures from ancient and modern times.

Combining his discerning eye with his knowledge of artists throughout history, Zhuang Rui now absolutely deserves the title of "expert."

Zhuang Rui still remembered Xiao Junxian, and without even opening the scroll, he was already convinced that the painting was undoubtedly an authentic work by Xiao Junxian.

Although Xiao Junxian was from Hunan, he lived in Shanghai in his later years and made a living by selling paintings. The fact that Lao Qi acquired this painting from Shanghai already illustrates part of the issue.

After putting on gloves, Zhuang Rui slowly rolled one of the axles, spreading the painting out on the table.

This is a typical Chinese ink landscape painting. The style is very elegant, with a clear distinction between near and far. As the layers of the painting move towards the distance, it expresses a very high realm and shows the artist's extraordinary painting skills.

"Teacher Zhuang, Teacher Zhuang, what do you think of this painting?"

It didn't matter if Zhuang Rui's appraisal took a little longer, but there were still hundreds of people waiting for their appraisals outside. Manager Zhang couldn't help but quietly call out to Zhuang Rui a few times, urging him to make his comments quickly.

Zhuang Rui was completely absorbed in the landscape painting when Zhang Li suddenly interrupted him. He looked up, somewhat bewildered, and said, "Ah? Not bad, not bad, it's an authentic work by Xiao Junxian..."

However, Zhuang Rui's words were somewhat unconvincing. It's not just about pointing out the problems with fake antiques; even if an antique is genuine, you need to describe its style and characteristics. Of course, what most people are concerned about here is its price.

So when Zhuang Rui said this, Lao Qi and some experts all showed a hint of disappointment and contempt on their faces. Now that no one is going to confront Zhuang Rui, isn't it all just his words, whether true or false?

After the previous jade-hunting incident, Lao Qi was no longer so rash and politely said, "Teacher Zhuang, could you please give me your opinion?"

"Hehe, then I'll just say a few words..."

Zhuang Rui's gaze remained fixed on the painting. He gently ran his hand over the areas of varying ink density and said, "Chinese landscape painting is very particular about the use of light and dark ink. The use of dark ink and light colors must be moderate and appropriate."

The ink application in this painting is very skillful, and every stroke has a clear origin, demonstrating a very solid foundation.

To put it bluntly, modern masters like Qi Baishi and Zhang Daqian may not have had as profound a foundation in basic skills as Mr. Xiao Junxian.

As a modern painter, Mr. Xiao not only grasped the essence of ancient painting but also incorporated his own thoughts and creativity, resulting in a unique artistic style...

When Zhuang Rui finished speaking, the room was so quiet that only the sound of everyone breathing could be heard.

"Personally, I greatly admire Mr. Xiao. Many friends may not know that Mr. Xiao Junxian was a very famous calligrapher and painter in the late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China. Moreover, Mr. Xiao once gave up his official position to become a teacher, which was the first time at that time."

During his time as a teacher, Mr. Xiao also nurtured many traditional Chinese painters from the Republican era to the early days of the People's Republic of China, such as Chen Shizeng and Lü Fengzi, who were all his students.

This painting is Mr. Xiao's imitation of Ju Ran's "Mountain Dwelling" from the Five Dynasties period. It can be said to be one of Xiao Junxian's masterpieces and has great collection value. Congratulations, sir..."

Zhuang Rui's remarks ranged from the painting style to the artist himself, explaining profound principles in a simple and easy-to-understand way. The audience listened with rapt attention, and even after Zhuang Rui finished his comments, they were still in a daze, feeling that there was still more to say.

A little over a minute later, led by Manager Zhang, applause suddenly erupted and lasted for a long time.

"Isn't Teacher Zhuang a jade expert? How come he's also so proficient in traditional Chinese painting?"

"What do you know? These experts are all experts in one thing, otherwise how could they be on CCTV?"

"That's right, what Professor Zhuang said was excellent, it really felt like I'd attended a class..."

After the applause subsided, everyone began to discuss among themselves, but they spoke very quietly, afraid of disturbing Zhuang Rui.

If Zhuang Rui's earlier discovery of a bargain demonstrated his keen eye and involved an element of luck, then this explanation unequivocally reveals his profound theoretical knowledge.

There were many people there who were interested in calligraphy and painting, and many of them did not know Xiao Junxian's name. After hearing Zhuang Rui, a jade expert, express his views, they were all convinced.

"Teacher Zhuang, how much is this painting worth?"

Now that the authenticity has been determined, the price is naturally Lao Qi's biggest concern.

"Mr. Xiao Junxian's paintings have great potential for collection, but the price of modern landscape paintings is not very high. I estimate it should be between 40,000 and 60,000 yuan..."

Zhuang Rui pondered for a while before offering this price. To be honest, he really wanted to acquire the painting, because there are very few people who paint traditional Chinese landscape paintings in modern times, and this painting can be considered a representative work.

Some friends might ask, if it's representative, why is the price so low? This is based on market demand. As Zhuang Rui mentioned earlier, it has great potential for collection. The main reason for the current low price is that no one is speculating on it.

Do you really think that paintings by artists like Zhang Qixu were valuable from the beginning? It was only after they were given numerous titles and hyped up that they shone brightly in the art market.

If Zhuang Rui could acquire this painting, display it in his museum, and credit it as the foremost landscape painter in modern China, its value would instantly increase a hundredfold.

Someone familiar with Lao Qi, who knew the origin of his painting, immediately said, "Lao Qi, congratulations! You acquired this a few years ago, right? In just a few years, the price has doubled..."

"Hehe, I don't even know if anyone will buy it if I were to sell it..." Old Qi said modestly.

"You want to sell?"

Zhuang Rui's heart skipped a beat, and he said, "This must be Master Qi, right? I'm currently collecting modern Chinese art. If you're interested in selling it, I can offer a price. What do you think?"

Zhuang Rui's museum is currently lacking modern calligraphy and paintings. Although Xiao Junxian is not well-known, his painting style is steady and elegant, representing a relatively high level of art in the late Qing Dynasty.

"Hehe, Teacher Zhuang, if you like it, just name your price..."

Old Qi himself made a living by selling his collection. He was a jade collector, and the reason he collected this painting was to make money from it. Since Zhuang Rui wanted to buy it, he naturally had no reason not to sell it.

Zhuang Rui pondered for a moment, then extended his right thumb and forefinger, gestured, and said, "Eighty thousand, Master Qi. Even if this painting goes to auction, the price shouldn't exceed sixty thousand. I'll offer eighty thousand. What do you think?"

"Eighty thousand?!"

Old Qi was stunned. He originally thought Zhuang Rui would offer a price of forty or fifty thousand, but he didn't expect Zhuang Rui to offer four times his purchase price as soon as he opened his mouth, which was something Old Qi did not expect.

“Master Qi, if you could keep this painting for another seven or eight years, it would be worth more than 80,000 yuan. However, in the current art market, the price I offered is already the highest...”

Seeing that Lao Qi was hesitant, Zhuang Rui quickly added more firewood. If this painting were in his hands, he could definitely drive up its price within two years, not seven or eight. He wouldn't do a losing business.

"Okay, I'll sell it. Manager Zhang, please provide a notarized sales certificate..."

Although Lao Qi didn't know much about calligraphy and painting, and didn't know the specific prices of Xiao Junxian's works, he believed that Zhuang Rui wouldn't dare to speak carelessly in front of so many people.

The antique trade isn't something you can just sell because you have items. It depends on timing, location, and people to get a good price. If he misses Zhuang Rui's opportunity, Lao Qi might not be able to find another shop that can sell for 80,000. That's why he agreed so readily.

Not to mention that Zhuang Rui was busy with appraisals and transactions, undercurrents were also surging around the Zhengzhou Antique City. After receiving Zhuang Rui's text message, Jiang Hao immediately coordinated with the Zhengzhou police and mobilized a large number of plainclothes police officers to enter the antique market.

Chapter 695 Hype

Zhuang Rui was unaware that Jiang Hao had mobilized people to monitor the antique market, nor had Jiang Hao told him. Without a word, Jiang Hao had established surveillance over the antique market and its surrounding area.

According to Jiang Hao and others' analysis, given Yu Zhenping's suspicious nature, once he knows Zhuang Rui is in the antique market, he will definitely come to check it out. Perhaps they can find Yu Zhenping's whereabouts here and follow him to his hiding place, so that they won't have to trouble Zhuang Rui anymore.

Of course, the terms previously agreed upon with Zhuang Rui cannot be taken as fact.

Zhuang Rui's mind wasn't on Yu Zhenping at the moment; he was still thinking about how to hype up the "Mountain Dwelling" painting he had just acquired.

The speculation and business operation model of antique prices are actually not that different. Why can a bottle of 1982 Moutai sell for tens of thousands of yuan, while a bottle of 1982 Erguotou can only sell for a maximum of 100 yuan? Isn't it just the effect of speculation?

According to market rules, where there is hype, there will inevitably be neglect. In Zhuang Rui's view, Xiao Junxian's works have been neglected by the market, and by a large margin.

Just like this painting is of Moutai quality, but it's sold at the price of Erguotou in the market, with great potential for appreciation. This is one of the main reasons why Zhuang Rui was willing to pay a price higher than the market price to acquire it.

Furthermore, money is no longer the most important thing for Zhuang Rui. If there are no natural disasters or man-made calamities, his money will only increase. So as long as he can find something, Zhuang Rui doesn't mind spending more money.

Anyway, his museum isn't going to close after just a year or two. The essence of antiques lies in the word "antique." Even if he doesn't hype it up, the items he bought at high prices now might be worth many times more in three to five years.

Some people don't understand why they're still selling this product now, knowing it will go up in price. But these business people aren't stupid!

The logic is actually quite simple: they need money to buy things. If they have too many items accumulating, they won't have the funds to shop for the things they truly like.

To put it bluntly, this is like playing the stock market. If the stock you buy goes up, you have to sell it and choose another potential stock. Otherwise, if everyone bought things and held them in their hands, the antique market would have no goods circulating long ago.

After agreeing on the price with Lao Qi, Zhuang Rui asked Peng Fei to take Lao Qi to the bank and instructed Peng Fei to withdraw more money. Today was a rare opportunity, and if these antique dealers could bring out some good items, Zhuang Rui would definitely be able to leave with a full load.

"Teacher Zhuang, what do you think of this item of mine?"

After Lao Qi finished discussing his business, the person behind him immediately brought over the items and placed them on the table in front of Zhuang Rui.

"This thing is a bit strange..."

Zhuang Rui's eyes lit up when he saw the bronze artifact in front of him, but after he infused his spiritual energy into the artifact, his brows immediately furrowed.

This bronze vessel is not large, about 10 centimeters high and about 7 or 8 centimeters in diameter. It has three legs at the bottom in the shape of a tripod, and the body is round. It is covered with copper rust and has not been artificially treated. At first glance, it should be a genuine artifact.

However, Zhuang Rui could see through his spiritual energy that the bronze artifact was filled with purple spiritual energy, but it was very obvious that this purple energy was dissipating.

Moreover, the three legs beneath the bronze vessel were completely empty, devoid of any spiritual energy. Zhuang Rui took a magnifying glass, examined it carefully for a while, and then a look of understanding appeared in his eyes.

Under magnification, it can be seen that the three legs of this bronze vessel are slightly different in color from the body, indicating that they were added later. Seeing this, Zhuang Rui felt a little regretful. If the three legs were not damaged, this bronze vessel could be listed as a national first-class cultural relic.

Don't let its small size fool you; this object is shaped like a bronze ding (鼎), yet it's neither quite a ding nor a dun (敦), but rather a combination of both. It has three legs like a ding and a round belly like a dun, but lacks straight handles, unlike the typical ding shape. In ancient times, this was likely a ritual vessel used for sacrifices to heaven.

Seeing this, Zhuang Rui couldn't help but sigh inwardly. Henan truly deserves its reputation as the Central Plains, with its long history. First came the Fish-Dragon Jade, then this bronze tripod. These unverified artifacts are also readily available everywhere.

Seeing Zhuang Rui remain silent in thought, the owner of the item grew anxious and asked, "Teacher Zhuang, what era do you think this thing is from? Are you willing to buy it?"

"I'm sorry, this item of yours has a very rare shape, but there's one thing: it's incomplete. These three legs were added later..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head. The defining features of a ding vessel are its base and straight handles. Since it lacks both of these characteristics, what's the point of having it? Selling it as junk is pointless, especially since it's not even pure copper.

"That's impossible! Teacher Zhuang, could you be mistaken?"

No one can stand it when someone says something is bad about their stuff. The person who was just praising Zhuang Rui suddenly became furious, almost ready to roll up his sleeves and start a fight.

"Look at the difference between the body and the three legs. The color and rust are wrong. Although this item was added later, it's not a forgery. It's still quite nice to keep and admire it..."

Having experienced the appraisal events in Jinan and on CCTV, Zhuang Rui had seen quite a few people like this. Without saying much, he simply handed over the magnifying glass in his hand.

No matter how much he said, nothing could prove the point. After examining the bronze tripod carefully, the man's face turned extremely ugly. He picked it up and squeezed out of the crowd without looking back.

Watching the man leave, Zhuang Rui shook his head and said, "Gentlemen, these antiques are all passed down from our ancestors. However, after so many years, it's normal for them to be somewhat damaged. Moreover, there have been forgeries in every generation. Don't be too fixated on whether the objects are genuine or fake. Even if this thing is fake now, won't it become an antique in a few hundred years?"

"Yes, Teacher Zhuang is right, everyone needs to have the right mindset..."

"That's right, everyone wants their own things to be the best, but where are there so many good things to have..."

"Teacher Zhuang, it's my turn. Please take a look at my case..."

Zhuang Rui's words elicited a burst of laughter from the audience, and the previously tense atmosphere eased.

The next few items Zhuang Rui appraised were all modern handicrafts, but the forgery techniques were far more sophisticated than those in Panjiayuan. It is said that most fake antiques come from Henan, which broadened Zhuang Rui's horizons.

About half an hour later, Peng Fei and Lao Qi returned. However, Peng Fei had a bulging backpack on his back. He had taken out a full 800,000 yuan in cash as Zhuang Rui had instructed.

Zhuang Rui currently lacks Han and Tang dynasty ceramics, but he does have all the bronzes. However, he doesn't dare to openly buy them here. So, Zhuang Rui's goal is to find some miscellaneous items to fill his jade and miscellaneous items shop.

However, Zhuang Rui was somewhat disappointed with the items that were brought for appraisal later. They were mostly modern imitations, and even if there were one or two genuine items, they were not of high value and not worth his time.

Before they knew it, it was noon. Manager Zhang had already booked a banquet next to the antique market. The expert fee was waived, but it was necessary to treat the expert to a meal. You see, given Zhuang Rui's current status in the antique world, attending such an appraisal event would surely earn him at least 100,000 to 200,000 yuan as a service fee.

The people accompanying him included several leaders from the local antique association, but those waiting for Zhuang Rui's appraisal did not receive such treatment. They all left the antique market to find a place to eat and then return to queue up.

They also realized that Zhuang Rui alone had no chance of appraising everyone's items today; only those who were at the front of the line would have a chance.

"Hmm? That person looks kind of familiar?"

As soon as Zhuang Rui stepped out of the antique market, he saw a primary school student walk past him, wearing a red scarf around his neck despite the hot weather. He was momentarily stunned.

Surrounded by Zhang Li and the others, Zhuang Rui didn't think much of it and followed them across the street to the hotel.

Just as Zhuang Rui entered the hotel, the figure that had just walked past him turned around and glanced at Zhuang Rui before disappearing into the intersection.

This person was Yu Zhenping. However, to Jiang Hao and the others' surprise, he did not enter the antique market. This rendered all of Team Leader Jiang's arrangements futile. After a day of hard work, they had no choice but to withdraw their personnel.

"Manager Zhang, shall we continue?"

After returning to the antique market after dinner, Zhuang Rui sat down for a while and took a sip of water. Seeing the long queue outside, he couldn't help but smile wryly. He now understood why the experts were invited in such large numbers; the workload was truly immense.

"Peng Fei, sixty thousand, pay up..."

Zhuang Rui handed Peng Fei a jade ruyi from the mid-Qing Dynasty that he had been playing with, and stood up to stretch his back.

After finishing his meal, he sat there and looked at about fifty or sixty antiques. Although there were quite a few genuine pieces, Zhuang Rui only liked six or seven of them, and he spent a total of about 400,000 yuan.

During this time, Jiang Hao made several phone calls, asking if Yu Zhenping had contacted him. It seems that the guy was also getting anxious. Since he didn't have the initiative, he was naturally hesitant to do things.

"Next....."

Manager Zhang, who was standing at the door, shouted loudly towards the outside. He had truly seen what an expert was like today.

No matter what type of antique it is, Zhuang Rui can identify its authenticity and provide evidence as soon as it comes into his hands. Zhuang Rui is a true expert in all things antiques. The saying "everyone has their own specialty" does not apply to Zhuang Rui. So far, there is no object that can stump him.

"Hey, this is a nice item..."

As Zhang Li shouted, an elderly man in his sixties entered the room. Zhuang Rui's eyes lit up when he saw the object the man was carrying.

Chapter 696 Wooden Tablet

The old man was short, probably in his early sixties, and wore a sweat-wicking white training uniform, making him look quite energetic. However, from the moment he entered the office, Zhuang Rui's eyes were fixed on the object he was carrying.

The old man was holding a wooden board about one meter long and seventy centimeters wide. It was a dark red color and had some relief carvings on the side of the board facing Zhuang Rui.

Zhuang Rui was sitting not far from the door. As soon as the old man came in, although he couldn't examine the wood carving closely, Zhuang Rui could tell that the relief on the wooden board was a door god with a large head and a small body. As for whether it was Qin Qiong or Yuchi Gong, Zhuang Rui couldn't tell.

Although the wood was very fine, Zhuang Rui could tell that it was probably not made of sandalwood, otherwise the old man probably wouldn't have been able to lift it.

"Grandpa, come, come, it's so hot, put your things down first..."

Zhuang Rui stood up and helped the old man place the wooden plank on the square table. After handling it, Zhuang Rui felt that although the plank was quite thick, it was not very heavy.

"I'll do it myself, I won't let the teacher do it for me..."

The old man waved his hand repeatedly, but finally, at Zhuang Rui's insistence, he let go and allowed Zhuang Rui to put the things on the table.

"Hehe, old man, have some water first..."

Zhuang Rui laughed. Manager Zhang, now acting as a waiter, immediately took a glass of water and handed it over.

"Thank you, Xiao Zhang..."

The old man seemed to know Zhang Li. After taking the water Zhang Li poured for him, he stood there somewhat awkwardly and said, "Teacher Zhuang, this thing was passed down from my ancestors and has always been kept at home. Recently, our house was demolished, and the compensation wasn't enough to buy a house in the city, so I brought this thing here for you to see. If it's worth a little money, I'll sell it..."

"Old man, just call me Xiao Zhuang. I don't deserve to be called a teacher. May I ask if your ancestors were from Zhuxian Town?"

Zhuang Rui's eyes lit up when he heard the old man was selling this item. Despite its ordinary wood, it was no ordinary object; when he examined it with his spiritual energy, the wood contained a yellowish-white spiritual energy, indicating it was at least a relic from the early to mid-Qing Dynasty.

The full name of this woodblock should be New Year picture engraving board, and the New Year pictures made from it are called woodblock New Year pictures. Before printed materials dominated the market, the paper pictures that people used to paste during festivals were all made from this inconspicuous woodblock.

Those familiar with history should have heard of Zhuxian Town. Yue Fei once defeated the Jin army here. If it weren't for the twelve imperial edicts ordering his execution, perhaps Chinese history would have been rewritten. However, in modern times, Zhuxian Town is famous for its woodblock New Year pictures.

Zhuxian Town woodblock New Year paintings, along with Yangliuqing New Year paintings from Tianjin, Taohuawu New Year paintings from Jiangsu, Weifang New Year paintings from Shandong, and Mianzhu New Year paintings from Sichuan, are collectively known as the Five Great New Year Paintings and have been listed as one of the World Intangible Cultural Heritages. They are also among the most folk-style handicrafts.

The characteristics of Zhuxian Town New Year paintings are full composition, bold and concise lines, simple and exaggerated shapes, and fresh and bright colors, which are in line with the colors of the woodblock prints.

Another characteristic of Zhuxian Town New Year paintings is that they are divided into two categories: one is paintings of deities, such as the Kitchen God and the God of Heaven and Earth, and the other is paintings of door gods. Door gods are the most common in Zhuxian Town woodblock New Year paintings, and the door gods are mainly military generals Qin Qiong and Yuchi Jingde.

Therefore, as soon as Uncle He entered, Zhuang Rui immediately guessed the origin of the wooden tablet. Zhuxian Town is located in Henan Province, and door god carvings are a local specialty. If Zhuang Rui didn't have this kind of insight, he wouldn't be able to get into the antique business.

"Oh, how embarrassing! Since you've figured it out, Teacher Zhuang, I won't hide it anymore. You're right, my family moved from Zhuxian Town..."

The old man nodded, a hint of embarrassment on his face, as if he had done something wrong by bringing the wooden tablet here today.

"Teacher Zhuang, this is Uncle He. Our families used to live together and were very close. Uncle He is in urgent need of money recently and has been asking me to sell this piece of wood. Since you're looking to buy something today, I called Uncle He and asked him to bring it over for you to take a look..."

Seeing that the old man seemed hesitant to speak, Zhang Li, standing to the side, recounted the whole story to Zhuang Rui.

It turns out that the old man was from Zhuxian Town. This wooden carving was also a family heirloom. However, after that crazy era, although the item was still there, their family's craftsmanship was not passed down. The old man also left his hometown and came to Zhengzhou with his family.

Uncle He worked as a laborer his whole life. Although his son was filial, he wasn't very capable and only earned a fixed salary. The family had enough to eat and drink, but they didn't save much money.

The sudden announcement of demolition means that if the residents have to move to the suburbs, their son and daughter-in-law will have to commute much further to work, and it will be inconvenient for their grandson to go to school. So, Uncle He wants to buy a house near where he used to live.

However, the government compensation is still more than 200,000 yuan short of the original amount needed to buy a house in the same area, which is causing the old man a lot of worry. After thinking it over, it seems that the only thing of value in the house is the wooden plaque left by his ancestors.

So after rummaging through his belongings to find this old man's work, Uncle He asked Zhang Li to help him sell it. In the past two months, several people have come to his house to look at it, but because the old man's asking price was a bit high, they couldn't reach an agreement.

Zhang Li only called Uncle He after seeing how generous Zhuang Rui was, to see if Zhuang Rui was interested.

"Grandpa, let me check the things first..."

Zhuang Rui was afraid that if he asked to buy it, the other party would raise the price on the spot. Besides, when he was learning miscellaneous appreciation from Uncle De, he had already heard about New Year picture woodblocks. He could take this opportunity to see them for himself.

"Please, feel free to look around..."

Although Zhuang Rui was young, the old man, having received Zhang Li's instructions, knew that he was a nationally renowned antique expert, hence his somewhat reserved demeanor.

Zhuang Rui didn't say anything more. He picked up a magnifying glass and carefully examined the wooden board on the table.

Woodblock printing originated in the Tang Dynasty, but it became popular from the Song Dynasty onwards. Since these were folk handicrafts, the wood used to make the woodblocks was sourced from wherever it was available, and the quality of the wood was generally poor. Woodblocks from the Tang and Song Dynasties would probably have long since decayed and become difficult to preserve.

Ordinary wooden boards are carved from boxwood, which is widely distributed. However, in Zhuang Rui's eyes, this wooden board was carved from peach wood, which is unique to Feicheng, Shandong. After hundreds of years, the wooden board is still dense and delicate, and emits a faint fragrance.

After observing for a while, Zhuang Rui looked up and asked the old man, "Uncle He, how much do you want to sell this wooden tablet for?"

"This...this, 300,000..."

He Bo hesitated for a moment before quoting a price, which caused many people in the room to shake their heads. They were all from Henan and were familiar with the woodblocks from Zhuxian Town. Generally speaking, woodblocks like these could be bought for 100,000 yuan.

"Sir, 300,000 is a bit too expensive..."

"Yes, although there are fewer woodblocks now, we can still get them in Zhuxian Town..."

To the experts in the room, He Bo was asking for an exorbitant price. Judging from the prices Zhuang Rui had given when appraising the items earlier, they knew perfectly well that this price was too high.

"Three hundred thousand?"

Zhuang Rui frowned slightly; the price was higher than he had expected.

"It's 300,000, Teacher Zhuang. This thing has been passed down in my family. Selling it now would be a disservice to my ancestors. I won't sell it for less than 300,000. At most, I'll move to the suburbs..."

Uncle He has a deep affection for this woodblock. He often saw it when he was a child. Later, he fled famine with his family to Zhengzhou. He didn't bring anything with him except this woodblock. It can be said that this woodblock also embodies the old man's longing for his elders.

"Alright, Uncle He, it's as you said, 300,000. Manager Zhang, let's write up an agreement. Peng Fei, come up with 300,000..."

After thinking about it for a while, Zhuang Rui finally decided to buy it. This wooden tablet was obviously carved from wood sourced from Shandong. It has been preserved from the mid-Qing Dynasty to the present day without a single crack or insect infestation, which is extremely rare.

"Brother Zhuang, this thing isn't worth 300,000, is it?"

Peng Fei took out thirty stacks of RMB from his backpack and placed them on the table.

The question Peng Fei raised was exactly what the collectors in the room were thinking: spending 300,000 yuan to buy something that was only worth 100,000 yuan, it seemed like a bad deal.

Zhuang Rui smiled upon hearing this and said, "Peng Fei, although this wooden tablet doesn't date back to the Ming Dynasty, it should be from around the Kangxi era, which makes it quite precious. Based on that, we should add some points; the price should be increased by at least 50,000 from the original 100,000."

Secondly, this wooden board is carved from peach wood. As everyone knows, peach wood is believed to ward off evil spirits, and peach wood from Feicheng, Shandong is considered an even more powerful

object for warding off evil and suppressing disasters. Based on this alone, I can add another 50,000 yuan to the price.

Thirdly, consider the condition. This wooden tablet is in excellent condition, without any insect damage or rot, and the carving is exquisite. That alone adds another 50,000 yuan to the price..."

The people in the room found it amusing, and one of them exclaimed, "Boss Zhuang, what about the remaining 50,000?"

Upon hearing this, Zhuang Rui cupped his hands in a gesture of respect to the four sides of the room and said with a smile, "Gentlemen, this wooden board is an heirloom of Uncle He's family. Although I can't call myself a gentleman, I'm still taking what others cherish. Adding another 50,000 would be reasonable, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, Teacher Zhuang is right!"

"Teacher Zhuang is so kind and righteous!"

"Yes, someone with both loyalty and integrity deserves the title of expert..."

"No doubt about it, Teacher Zhuang. If I ever need anything in the future, I'll definitely come to *** City to find you..."

Zhuang Rui's words not only drew cheers from the patrons inside the room, but also earned the thumbs-up from those waiting outside to appraise the items. Zhuang Rui's remarks completely convinced these people who were in the antique business.

Chapter 697 Connections

"Teacher Zhuang, thank you so much, thank you so much..."

Upon hearing Zhuang Rui's words, Mr. He, in his sixties, couldn't help but take out a tissue and wipe away his tears.

These days, if you ask what the hardest thing is, it's borrowing money. Aside from immediate family members like fathers and sons, even relatives are hesitant to ask. We hear stories all the time of people turning against each other because of loans.

To buy this house, Uncle He had swallowed his pride and begged many people, but without exception, he was turned away by everyone. He never expected that this young man in front of him would agree so readily.

In fact, Uncle He had consulted many people about the woodblock and understood its value. By buying the woodblock, Zhuang Rui had given him at least 100,000 yuan as a favor.

"Uncle He, woodblock printing is a traditional craft of our country. Woodblocks from the Ming and Qing dynasties will only increase in price. In a few years, they might be worth more than 300,000. Don't go back on your word then..."

Zhuang Rui laughed. He said this partly to comfort the old man, and partly because what he said was true. In the 1990s, you could buy lacquerware in Shanxi for three to five hundred yuan, but now you can't buy it for thirty to fifty thousand yuan. As time goes by, these things have huge appreciation potential.

After exchanging pleasantries with Uncle He, Zhuang Rui turned to Zhang Li and said, "Manager Zhang, arrange for a few people to take Uncle He home or to the bank. Handling so much money is too much for him..."

This antique market has always been a mixed bag. Back in Pengcheng, a few petty thugs would go to extremes for a few tens of thousands of yuan. If Uncle He were to carry this 300,000 yuan alone, he might be targeted by someone as soon as he leaves the antique market. In that case, Zhuang Rui would be bringing trouble upon the old man.

"Yes, yes, Teacher Zhuang is so thoughtful. Xiao Liu, Xiao Wang, you two take Uncle He to the bank and deposit the money there for peace of mind..."

Zhang Li nodded repeatedly and then arranged for two security guards to accompany Uncle He to the bank to deposit the money, as it wasn't safe to keep it at home.

In the following period, Zhuang Rui appraised another forty or fifty antiques. He was very fast at appraising them, and he could point out whether they were real or fake in a single sentence. His citations and references made everyone believe him.

There were seven or eight good items among them, but none of the people wanted to sell them, and Zhuang Rui didn't force them. However, at the very end of today's appraisal event, he spent 480,000 RMB to acquire a flower and bird painting by Huang Binhong.

Anyone familiar with the history of modern Chinese painting knows that Huang Binhong was an indispensable master of traditional Chinese painting in modern times.

In the history of modern Chinese painting, there is a saying that "Huang in the South and Qi in the North". "Qi in the North" refers to Qi Baishi, a master of flower and bird painting who lived in Yunnan, while "Huang in the South" refers to Huang Binhong, a master of landscape painting from Anhui.

Huang Binhong became famous later than Qi Baishi, and he was a late bloomer. The price of his works was not high at the beginning, but it has been rising year by year. In recent years, it has even surpassed the price of Qi Baishi's paintings.

Compared to the "Mountain Dwelling" painting that Zhuang Rui bought first, Huang Binhong's works were much more expensive. The price difference between the two was like the appearance fee of a superstar and a newcomer in the film industry—they were not on the same level. This made Zhuang Rui feel quite sorry for Xiao Junxian.

It's a bit of a pity that the painting by Huang Binhong that Zhuang Rui received is a secondary work, a flower-and-bird painting, and it's not very large. Of course, if it were a landscape painting, Zhuang Rui probably wouldn't be able to buy it for 4.5 million, let alone 450,000.

However, Zhuang Rui was quite satisfied with his trip to the antique market today. He managed to snag two ancient Shang Dynasty cloud-shaped stones at bargain prices, two works by modern calligraphers and painters, and even an early Qing Dynasty New Year picture printing block. These kinds of items, circulating among the people, are very difficult to obtain, and this has added some treasures to his museum's collection.

"Manager Zhang, senior colleagues, if you all have the time, please do me the honor of visiting my museum when it opens..."

The people outside who were appraising the treasures had all left. Zhuang Rui, with two paintings tucked under his arm and Peng Fei, holding the woodblock print of the New Year picture, prepared to say goodbye to the people from the antique market.

Previously, Zhuang Rui, Lao Qi, Manager Zhang, and others had exchanged business cards. He was also giving a shout-out to his museum, which hadn't even opened yet.

Although he didn't have Mr. Ma's connections, Zhuang Rui believed that with his appraisal skills, he could still gather some collectors and frequently visit museums to exchange information about their collections and related knowledge.

"Teacher Zhuang, don't worry, I'll definitely be there. You've had a long day. I was going to treat you to dinner tonight, but since you don't have time, that's fine. But please accept this..."

Manager Zhang and others escorted Zhuang Rui to the entrance of the antique market. When they hailed a taxi, Zhang Li stuffed a plastic bag into Zhuang Rui's hand.

Zhuang Rui squeezed the money in his hand and knew there was at least thirty or forty thousand yuan inside. He quickly said, "Manager Zhang, let's forget about this. We're all friends, there's no need for this..."

Zhuang Rui wasn't just being polite. He had a good day and made so many friends in Zhengzhou's antique world. He really didn't want the money. Besides, you really couldn't get him to make an appearance for three or five yuan these days.

"Teacher Zhuang, you absolutely must keep this. Otherwise, if word gets out, people will say we don't know the rules..."

For Zhang Li, getting to know Zhuang Rui was definitely something to celebrate. Spending a little money to maintain the relationship would make it easier to ask Zhuang Rui for help in the future. This is what they call "burning incense in ordinary times so that you can pray to Buddha when you need it!"

It's important to know that antique markets often invite renowned experts to conduct on-site appraisals to enhance their reputation and standing among collectors. Of course, the experts' fees are paid by the organizers, and the money ends up in their own pockets every time an appraisal certificate is issued.

However, nowadays, not only is the antique market chaotic and in need of cracking down on fakes, but even the experts who appraise antiques vary greatly in quality.

Some people get a certificate from who-knows-where and then use it to swindle people around. Zhang Li has also suffered from this before, so spending 30,000 to 50,000 yuan to get to know a nationally renowned appraisal expert like Zhuang Rui is really nothing.

"Hey, I'm telling you, don't give it to me! Why are you passing it around like that? Are you even leaving or not?"

It's fine that Zhuang Rui and Manager Zhang are refusing to cooperate, but the taxi driver is getting impatient. Isn't this delaying his ability to make money?

"Alright, Manager Zhang, then I'll take my leave. I'll be waiting for you at *** on the 8th of next month..."

Seeing that waiting around on the side of the road wasn't a solution, Zhuang Rui thanked Zhang Li and got into the taxi with Peng Fei.

"Did you two just buy these?"

After asking Zhuang Rui where they wanted to go, the taxi driver glanced at the items they were holding in the rearview mirror and said with a disdainful look, "What good stuff can you find in this antique market? It's all fake. How much did you two spend? If you want to buy something good these days, you have to go to an auction house..."

"Well, it didn't cost much, only three or five hundred yuan, so it's just a loss..."

Hey, this is really a national sensation! Zhuang Rui couldn't help but be amused by the taxi driver's words. However, he didn't dare to say how much he bought the thing for, otherwise the guy would definitely be so surprised that he would create a car accident.

"Peng Fei, let's go get something to eat. Let's get some rest early tonight..."

After returning to the hotel, Zhuang Rui put the items in the room and called out to Peng Fei. He was feeling a bit tired after appraising over a hundred antiques that day.

Peng Fei shook his head and said, "Brother Zhuang, you go ahead. Just pack it up for me later. I'll watch the stuff here..."

The room not only contained the things Zhuang Rui bought today, but also the 500,000 RMB and USD they brought with them in the safe. Peng Fei was a little worried when he went out today, and he checked the safe as soon as he came back.

"What's there to be afraid of? We'll just call the police if we lose money anyway. Let's go eat..."

Zhuang Rui shook his head indifferently. His room was under close surveillance, and if anything was stolen from there, it would only prove that the police were incompetent.

"Huh? What does this kid want to call again?"

Just as Zhuang Rui was about to leave with Peng Fei, his phone rang. He looked at it and saw it was Yu Zhenping again. Three calls in one day. Zhuang Rui felt that he and the other party were not that familiar.

"Mr. Zhuang, do you have time now?" Yu Zhenping's voice came through the phone after he pressed the answer button.

Zhuang Rui honestly replied, "Mr. Ren, I just got back to the hotel and was about to go eat. Do you have time? How about we grab something to eat together?"

Yu Zhenping, who was standing at the intersection 100 meters away from Zhuang Rui's hotel, swallowed hard and said, "Boss Zhuang, didn't you want to see the goods? Come downstairs now, I'll wait for you at the hotel entrance. I'll treat you to dinner later, but you have to come alone..."

Upon hearing Yu Zhenping's words, Zhuang Rui raised an eyebrow and said, "One person? Boss Ren, inspecting the goods is fine now, but one person won't do. My little brother must come along..."

To be honest, without Peng Fei going with him, Zhuang Rui really wouldn't have dared to go alone. He had witnessed Yu Laoda's madness before. Both of them were surnamed Yu, so who knew if Yu Zhenping had the same crazy genes as Yu Laoda?

"There's one more person?"

"Yes, Mr. Ren, I'm completely unfamiliar with Zhengzhou. What if... well, you're an expert in this field, so I don't need to say more, right?"

Zhuang Rui's tone was firm. If he didn't take Peng Fei with him, he would rather cancel the deal. As the saying goes, a wise man doesn't stand under a crumbling wall. As for the police mission, let whoever wants to go, I'm not taking that risk.

"Okay, come down right away, I'll wait for you at the hotel entrance..."

After thinking for a moment, Yu Zhenping touched the pistol in his pocket and agreed to Zhuang Rui's request.

Chapter 698 Tracking

"Peng Fei, take the money and get out of here..."

After hanging up, Zhuang Rui immediately took out another phone and dialed Jiang Hao's number to report the situation. Peng Fei then opened the hotel safe and retrieved the money from the two backpacks.

"Brother Zhuang, is it that person?"

Peng Fei, with a backpack slung over one shoulder, asked softly from behind Zhuang Rui. Compared to Zhuang Rui's serious expression, Peng Fei was much more relaxed. Back in the day, he had even dealt with drug dealers with his bare hands, so this was nothing to him.

"Yes, are you ready?" Zhuang Rui nodded, looking at Peng Fei.

"Hehe, let's go, Brother Zhuang. With me here, no one can touch you..."

Peng Fei smiled confidently, and as he raised his hand, a small, dark knife flipped across his wrist.

Before coming here, Zhuang Rui had wanted to ask the police to apply for a handgun for Peng Fei to use for self-defense, but Peng Fei refused. In his opinion, if the other party was only one person, it would be better to use his own knife than a gun. Peng Fei was absolutely confident that he could take care of the other party before he could pull the trigger.

"Hey kid, you didn't hide that knife there, did you? Be careful not to accidentally cut yourself..."

When Zhuang Rui looked at Peng Fei's crotch while speaking, Peng Fei's smile froze instantly, and he involuntarily squeezed his legs together, which made Zhuang Rui burst into laughter.

"Holy crap, it's real?"

Zhuang Rui still couldn't figure out where Peng Fei had hidden the knife, given how little he was wearing in this sweltering heat. Could it really have been hidden there?

"I can't be bothered to talk to you, let's go..."

Peng Fei looked embarrassed, pushed open the door with a huff, and walked out first.

Inside a Buick minivan outside the hotel sat four people. A surveillance camera was in the back, and a police officer in his thirties, dressed in plainclothes with an earpiece, muttered, "This guy's really causing trouble. If we catch him, we'll give him a good beating..."

"Stop complaining, and start listening in..."

Jiang Hao glared at the man, then spoke into a miniature microphone: "The target is coming down soon. All units, pay attention! All units, pay attention! Vehicle number three will follow the target first, and vehicle number five will take over in three minutes..."

"Number Three understands..."

"Number Five understands..."

Hearing the reply through his earpiece, Jiang Hao's expression softened slightly. To be honest, he also wanted to grumble a bit. He'd spent the whole day keeping watch near the antique market, but hadn't seen a single bird's feather. Being stuck in his car all day in this sweltering heat was incredibly frustrating.

Jiang Hao and his group were considered lucky; those who pretended to be cleaners and passersby were in a much worse situation. They wandered around under the scorching sun all day and almost got skin peeled off.

This is a joint case by the Beijing and Henan police. If Yu Zhenping escapes again, Jiang Hao will not only lose his position as the head of the task force, but he will also likely be relegated to an office in Chengdu where he spends his days drinking tea and reading newspapers.

Because Yu Zhenping was too small a target and too cunning, Jiang Hao, just in case, even made a special zipper for Zhuang Rui's backpack containing money. The thing looked like a zipper, but it was actually a miniature satellite positioning device.

It can be said that as long as Yu Zhenping has those two bags of money, the police can find his location in the shortest possible time.

"Damn, this guy's so suspicious. If he doesn't come soon, let's go eat..."

After Zhuang Rui and Peng Fei went downstairs, they waited for nearly 20 minutes, but Yu Zhenping did not show up. When they tried to call him, he kept getting a message that his phone was switched off, which made Zhuang Rui a little impatient.

"Mr. Zhuang, I'm sorry to have kept you waiting..."

Just as Zhuang Rui was about to turn back to the hotel, a taxi stopped about four or five meters away. Yu Zhenping rolled down the window, showed his face, and waved to Zhuang Rui.

"Mr. Ren, you... sigh, this isn't the first time we've done business together, is it really necessary? I've been to the black market in *** and ***, and I wasn't as cautious as you are..."

When Zhuang Rui saw Yu Zhenping, he couldn't help but grumble a few words. However, to Yu Zhenping, these words were perfectly normal. If Zhuang Rui had waited at the door for so long in the sweltering heat without any reaction, Yu Zhenping would have become suspicious.

"Mr. Zhuang, haha, I'm so sorry, I'm really sorry. There was a traffic jam on the way here, which delayed me a bit..."

Yu Zhenping pushed open the car door and got out of the car. He repeatedly bowed to Zhuang Rui to apologize, keeping a very low posture. However, his eyes were fixed on the backpack behind Peng Fei, and his left hand was in his pocket, never taken out.

In fact, Yu Zhenping had been hiding at a corner opposite the hotel, observing whether anyone was following Zhuang Rui. He only hailed a taxi when he felt there was no danger. However, perhaps because he had been wandering in the dark for a long time, Yu Zhenping still felt a little uneasy.

"Mr. Ren, I haven't eaten yet. How about we go back to the hotel and get something to eat?"

Taking advantage of the situation, Zhuang Rui patted Peng Fei's backpack on the back, blocked the taxi driver's view with his body, and pulled the backpack open a crack so Yu Zhenping could peek through. Then, lowering his voice, he said, "Boss Ren, what do you think? Am I, Zhuang, not a man of principle?"

"Mr. Zhuang, let's just forget about it. I'll treat you to dinner after this is all over..."

Yu Zhenping swallowed hard. He had only eaten two steamed buns for lunch, and he was even hungrier than Zhuang Rui. However, looking at the money in the bag, "Boss Ren" felt it would be safer to carry it on his own.

"Alright, then I'll definitely take advantage of you later..."

Zhuang Rui nodded in agreement, opened the taxi door and got in, while Yu Zhenping naturally sat in the front and signaled to the driver that they could start driving.

Zhuang Rui's hotel, Yuda International Trade Hotel, is located on Zhongyuan Road, a main thoroughfare with heavy traffic. After leaving the hotel, the car disappeared into the sea of cars.

"Target spotted! Target spotted! Car number three, now move to Zhongyuan Road in front of the target car, slow down, and let the target car pass..."

"Number Three understands. Target vehicle located. Tracking in progress..."

"Number 5, Number 5, the target car is almost at the Zhongyuan Road intersection. You can drive out now. You absolutely cannot lose it..."

"Number Five understands, Number Five understands..."

Upon seeing Yu Zhenping finally appear, Jiang Hao and the others immediately sprang into action, issuing various instructions to the different tracking teams. To avoid arousing Yu Zhenping's suspicion, Jiang Hao deployed three cars with Zhengzhou license plates on Zhongyuan Road, where the hotel was located, to take turns following him.

"Hey, sir, where are you headed? We've been driving around on this ring road for ages..."

After driving around the ring road four or five times, the taxi driver's face turned a little ugly. Although there have been fewer cases of murder and carjacking in recent years, it was hard to say that these people were not robbers, especially the two bags that Peng Fei was carrying. Could they be there to carry corpses?

Yu Zhenping said in an unfriendly tone, "It's not like we're not going to pay you, keep driving..."

"Even if you pay me, I won't drive. Sorry, I won't do business with you. Get out of the car..."

The taxi driver was already a little scared when he heard Yu Zhenping's loud voice coming from his small body. After hearing Yu Zhenping's words, he pulled the car to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes.

There were several shops along the roadside, and a lot of traffic was coming and going. The taxi driver, feeling a bit bolder, said, "I don't want your money anymore, just get out of the car now, or I'll call the police..."

"What kind of attitude is that? Do you believe I'll report you?"

Hearing that the fare was waived, Yu Zhenping was quite satisfied. After cursing the driver, he turned to the back and said, "Sorry, this driver is rude. Boss Zhuang, let's get another car..."

The main reason Yu Zhenping was willing to get out of the car was to prevent being followed. When he used to work with Boss Yu, he would change cars several times when going to a certain place for a transaction. Although Yu Zhenping was not familiar with this method, he would feel more at ease just by imitating it.

However, Yu Zhenping didn't know that with modern technology, let alone changing cars, even if he took Zhuang Rui underground, they would still be found out, unless he could convince Zhuang Rui to run naked and throw away the two bags of money, then the police might not be able to find him.

Zhuang Rui nodded and agreed, "Okay, but Boss Ren, let's hurry up, otherwise we'll only be able to eat at a street food stall after we're done..."

Zhuang Rui knew his actions were illegal, so he naturally had to be cautious. He had no objection to changing cars, but he still urged Yu Zhenping to hurry up, as he was really hungry.

Taking a taxi in Zhengzhou is quite convenient. Soon, Zhuang Rui and the others flagged down another car. This time, Yu Zhenping didn't drive around in circles. When the car reached an intersection on the outer ring road, Yu Zhenping pointed in a direction and told the taxi to drive in.

"Number One, Number One, the target vehicle is heading towards the outskirts of the city. There are fewer vehicles on this road. Should we follow it? Please advise..."

The road Yu Zhenping was taking was heading towards Jiaoshan Majialing. There were relatively few vehicles on this road at night, and the No. 5 car that was following him was afraid of being discovered by Yu Zhenping, so it stopped following.

Where does this road lead?

Sitting in the command vehicle, Jiang Hao asked a local policeman next to him.

"The only routes are to Jiaoshan and Majialing; beyond that is Xinmi City..."

"Okay, vehicles one through five, take the other road to these two locations first. Be discreet and don't arouse the target's suspicion..."

After thinking for a moment, Jiang Hao gave the order. In his opinion, the location where the Yu family's tomb raiding group was hiding cultural relics should not be too far away.

Moreover, Jiang Hao wasn't afraid of losing track of the person. Even after Zhuang Rui and Yu Zhenping completed their transaction, he could still pinpoint Yu Zhenping's location based on the backpack containing the money.

Chapter 699 Li Family Village

Jiang Hao's guess was correct, because he had already heard the address "Jiaoshan" from the bug on Zhuang Rui.

Meanwhile, the instruments inside the car showed that the target vehicle had entered the highway and was heading towards Jiaoshan.

After inquiring about the situation at Jiaoshan, Jiang Hao immediately arranged for personnel and vehicles to go to Jiaoshan to set up a control point, and his own command vehicle also drove towards Jiaoshan.

"Gentlemen, there aren't many people going to Jiaoshan at this time of year. It's so hot, there's no way to climb the mountain..."

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The first taxi driver was a quiet type, but this second taxi driver was a chatterbox. After finding out where he wanted to go, he kept talking non-stop, making Yu Zhenping want to pull out a gun and point it at his head to shut him up.

"My home is in Jiaoshan, can you please say less?"

Yu Zhenping's face was grim. He immediately recalled the words of the previous taxi driver: if he were really a robber, he would have shot this rambling driver dead.

"Okay, I won't say anything, I won't say anything..."

Considering the agreed-upon price of 400 yuan, the taxi driver finally shut up. Not only Yu Zhenping, but also Zhuang Rui and Peng Fei breathed a sigh of relief. This guy was too talkative; he could rival the taxi drivers in *** City.

After turning off the Zhengzhou-Shaolin-Luoyang Expressway, the road became much worse. The original asphalt road turned into a gravel road, and as we drove further in, the car became increasingly bumpy, as we ended up on a mountain road.

Zhuang Rui sat in the car and looked out the window. By the moonlight, he could see the distant mountain range. All around was quiet, and the only sound he could hear was the engine of the car.

From what the driver had just said, Zhuang Rui learned that although Jiaoshan was not too far from Zhengzhou, it was located in the Funiu Mountains and its economy was not very developed due to poor road conditions; it was a well-known impoverished mountainous area.

After a bumpy ride of over an hour on the rugged mountain road, the road improved slightly, and lights appeared ahead. Soon, the car entered a village, and Zhuang Rui saw a school sign by the roadside with the words "Hope Primary School" written on it.

It was only a little past eight o'clock in the evening. Because of the hot weather, many villagers gathered at the door to chat after dinner. When they saw a car driving by, they pointed at the taxi with curiosity, and some children even chased after it noisily.

Perhaps it was because of the trauma he experienced in Shaanxi, but whenever Zhuang Rui came to the countryside, he would always think of Yu Laoda's appearance covered in explosives. He couldn't help but glance at Yu Laoba sitting in front of him. Seeing that Yu Laoba's physique didn't look like he was carrying explosives, he felt a little relieved.

Guided by Yu Zhenping, the car passed through most of the village and stopped in front of a house at the village entrance. Beyond that, there were dense mountains.

Compared to the more dilapidated houses in the village, this house was a two-story building. From the car, all you could see was the high wall, with some broken glass on top of it, which was to prevent people from climbing over the wall.

"Mr. Ren, this place is truly a paradise on earth..."

Zhuang Rui got out of the car and looked at the mountains in the night. He could imagine that if it were early morning, there would be smoke rising from the village and mist in the mountains.

If Yu Zhenping is determined to stay here and not leave, the police probably really won't be able to do anything about him. This place doesn't even have a police station, let alone a security team. No one would expect that they would have such a stronghold in such a remote place.

"Hehe, this house is a gift for Boss Zhuang. You can come and stay here whenever you have free time. The people here are very kind and honest..."

Yu Zhenping also got out of the car, but as soon as he got out, he was surrounded by a group of children.

"Uncle Ba, Uncle Ba..."

When Zhuang Rui got out of the car, a group of village children kept their distance, but when they saw Yu Zhenping, they swarmed around him, shouting "Uncle Ba!"

"Come on, come on, eat and lie down, two pieces each, don't fight..."

Zhuang Rui had seen Yu Zhenping carrying a small bag when they were in Zhengzhou, and now he realized that it was full of candy. Yu Zhenping took the bag off and was handing out candy to the children in the village.

It's clear that Yu Zhenping really likes these children. After giving each child a piece of candy, he would affectionately pat the child's head. The cold look that often appeared in his eyes has become peaceful.

"It's Xiao Ba? You kids haven't been here in a while..."

While Yu Zhenping was handing out candy to the children, several villagers came over. The one leading them was an elderly man with a cane. He tapped Yu Zhenping gently with his cane and said loudly, "Get out of here, get out of here! You bunch of little brats, go home and suckle your mothers, don't crowd around here..."

Yu Zhenping raised his head and said with a smile, "Uncle Li, it's alright, it's alright, it's all over..."

"Haven't eaten yet? Come on, let's eat at home. You don't even have a stove there. Little Liu, go home and tell your aunt to kill that rooster..."

Without saying a word, Uncle Li grabbed Yu Zhenping. Although the other villagers didn't know Zhuang Rui and Peng Fei, they greeted them warmly. Even the taxi driver was pulled along.

"I'm really hungry, but don't kill the chicken. We can just have a bite tonight. Boss Zhuang, let's go eat first..." Yu Zhenping's stomach was practically growling. Without any hesitation, he called out to Zhuang Rui and was about to leave.

Upon seeing this, Kanye quickly shouted, "Which boss would like to pay me? I need to get home today..."

Upon hearing the driver ask for money, Yu Zhenping pretended to pat his pockets, but his eyes were fixed on Zhuang Rui. He said, "Money? Hey, look at me, I was in a hurry to get out. Mr. Zhuang, could you pay the fare first? We can settle the bill later..."

Let alone four hundred yuan, Yu Zhenping can't even come up with four yuan now. After eating two steamed buns at noon, he spent all his money on candy.

Zhuang Rui waved his hand and said, "What do you mean by 'counting' or 'not counting'? It's fine. Peng Fei, settle the fare..."

Zhuang Rui wasn't worried about not having a ride home. The police would definitely be able to enter the village tonight, and he could just follow the police car back.

"Come on, come on, let's go home for dinner. Little Liu, you're asking for a beating, aren't you? Why haven't you told your aunt yet?" Old Li urged Little Liu to hurry home and kill the chicken after they finished talking.

"Hey...hey, Sixth Brother, no, we need to keep this rooster to crow. Just stir-fry some vegetables, Uncle Li, we've had plenty of meat outside..."

Yu Zhenping quickly pulled Xiao Liuzi back. He knew that roosters played a very important role in the countryside. They not only crowed, but also led a group of hens. If the rooster was killed, the house would surely be in chaos.

Old Li slapped Yu Zhenping's hand away with his cane and said, "A chicken is nothing. If it weren't for you guys making so much money outside, how would the kids in our village be able to afford to go to school..."

"No, Uncle Li, if you're going to kill a chicken, we'll leave right away..."

"Alright, you've eaten all sorts of things outside anyway, so this chicken won't make a difference. Tomorrow I'll have Dazhuang go up the mountain and hunt some game for you. Little Bazi, you don't know, city people love this kind of food..."

After rambling on for a while, Old Li realized he didn't recognize the two people behind him. He looked at Yu Zhenping and said, "Little Ba, why didn't your older brother and Er Gouzi from our village come this time? These two look unfamiliar to me."

"Uncle Li, my eldest brother and Er Gou are in Shenzhen right now. They're quite busy this year. They'll come back after they're done with their work. Then we'll build a middle school in the village so the kids won't have to go to town to study."

These two are guests from ***. They've never been to the countryside before. I brought them here to have some fun. Tomorrow, I must have Brother Dazhuang hunt some wild boar or something to eat..."

Upon hearing Old Li mention Er Gouzi's name, Yu Zhenping's face showed a slightly unnatural expression, but under the cover of night, the villagers did not notice and crowded around him as they arrived at Old Li's house.

"Yes, we have plenty of wild game here. I'll have Dazhuang take some men to set traps in a bit. Xiao Ba, how much does it cost to build a middle school...?"

When Old Li heard Yu Zhenping say that he wanted to build a middle school in the village, his wrinkles immediately smoothed out with a smile. He had long forgotten about asking Yu Zhenping about the villagers and grabbed Yu Zhenping, asking him questions incessantly.

"Uncle Li, it doesn't cost much. The key is to hire teachers to give lessons. We can just pay them a salary..."

No one knew what Yu Zhenping was thinking. He chatted with Old Li in the local dialect, which Zhuang Rui could only understand most of, while Peng Fei listened with great interest.

As they talked, they arrived at Old Li's house. Zhuang Rui now knew that Old Li was the village secretary of Lijia Village. However, the village secretary was obviously very honest and upright. His house was just as dilapidated as everyone else's, with only a black and white television set from Village 21 in the main room.

Although people in the countryside eat late, they had already eaten long ago. Old Li's wife had lit the fire again and was frying eggs. She also heated up a few steamed buns before serving them.

Sure enough, Yu Zhenping and Zhuang Rui were starving. They grabbed the cornbread buns and ate them with scrambled eggs with scallions. Afterwards, they had a bowl of egg drop soup.

These are all free-range eggs, very fresh. They could sell for *** yuan per pound in the city.

"Wow, this soup is really delicious..."

Zhuang Rui thoroughly enjoyed his meal. Even the lunch at the fancy hotel couldn't compare to the delicious food here. After finishing his meal, Zhuang Rui took out a pack of Zhonghua cigarettes and offered one to each person in the room.

Chapter 700 Living Buddhas of Ten Thousand Families

"Kid, these cigarettes must cost several dollars a pack, right?"

Old Li had seen Zhonghua cigarettes when he was young, but after becoming the village party secretary, he never saw them again. When he went to meetings in town or township, he smoked the cheap cigarettes offered as a courtesy, costing only a few yuan a pack. At home, he just rolled tobacco leaves in paper and smoked them.

Inside the room was a young man who had worked away from home. After taking the cigarette from Zhuang Rui, he hadn't lit it yet. Hearing Old Li's words, he couldn't help but chuckle and said, "Uncle Li, you're ignorant, aren't you? This costs sixty or seventy yuan a pack..."

"What did you say? Sixty or seventy yuan a pack?"

Upon hearing this, Old Li quickly stubbed out his lit cigarette, examined it for a while in his palm, and said, "You kid, aren't you talking nonsense? This cigarette is the same as the one I smoke at meetings in town, it only costs a few yuan at most..."

"Uncle Li, forget about how much these cigarettes cost. Auntie's cooking is delicious. Consider this hundred yuan as payment for our meals..."

After finishing his meal, Zhuang Rui didn't want to stay there any longer. Otherwise, if the police arrived soon, he probably wouldn't even be able to see those cultural relics.

When Old Li saw Zhuang Rui take out his money, his face changed. He picked up the 100 yuan and tried to stuff it into Zhuang Rui's hand, saying, "No, no, a few fried eggs aren't worth that much..."

"Uncle Li, please take this. Aren't we going to eat wild game again tomorrow? That stuff is really expensive in the city. Consider this as payment for the meal..."

After Zhuang Rui arrived in this small mountain village and met these simple and honest rural people, the restlessness in his heart disappeared, and he also gained a new understanding of Boss Yu and his group.

From the conversation during dinner, Zhuang Rui had already figured out that the reason why Yu Laoba was so familiar with the people in the village was because of the Hope Primary School in the village.

This Hope Primary School was built with donations from Mr. Yu and a local villager nicknamed Er Gouzi.

Of course, Zhuang Rui didn't think that Boss Yu would be so kind as to spend hundreds of thousands to build a school. If he wasn't mistaken, Boss Yu's purpose was to establish a base for hiding cultural relics here.

Zhuang Rui's guess was correct; the facts were basically consistent with his imagination.

More than ten years ago, Yu Laoda met a man from this village who was working away from home. This man was Er Gouzi, whose real name was Li Wudi. Perhaps his parents named him this in remembrance of their ancestors who were invincible on the battlefield.

However, Li Wudi was a bit different. He had never wanted to farm since he was a child and spent his days idly. After driving his parents to their deaths, he spent his days stealing chickens and dogs. In the end, he couldn't make a living in the village anymore, so he finally packed his bags and went out to work and earn money.

Later, Boss Yu recruited Li Wudi into his tomb raiding gang, and they committed many cases together, making Li a core member of the gang.

Er Gouzi, who had once wreaked havoc on Lijia Village, returned home in glory. He held a three-day banquet in the village and sincerely apologized to the villagers he had wronged, presenting them with valuable gifts. This made the simple and honest villagers readily accept Er Gouzi, who had now become a big boss.

As the saying goes, a cunning rabbit has three burrows. Old Master Yu was suspicious by nature. In addition to setting up two places in the city to store antiques, he also lived in this village for a whole year.

As for Boss Yu, he is Er Gouzi's business partner. He came to Lijia Village to stay for a while because he was feeling unwell and needed a quiet place to recuperate.

With Yu Laoda's methods, over a year he won over these simple, honest villagers, who all considered him one of their own. Yu Zhenping also lived here for more than half a year, so he was quite familiar with the villagers.

There were originally no people living at the foot of Funiu Mountain. Legend has it that after Li Yan was poisoned by Li Zicheng at the end of the Ming Dynasty, the descendants of Li Yan and Hong Niangzi came here to live in seclusion, hence the name Li Family Village.

Perhaps out of fear of being found by government troops, Lijia Village was like a secluded paradise, only making contact with the outside world during the Republic of China period. It was not until after liberation that it was officially named and included in the government's planning.

Originally, the local government planned to build a road for Lijia Village in order to develop the tourism resources of Funiu Mountain. However, the policy changed later, and the original ecology was to be protected, so the road construction was put on hold.

Seven or eight years ago, Lijia Village was so poor that it was unimaginable. The village party secretary had to take a five or six-hour oxcart to go to the town for a meeting. He could only make the trip three or five times a year to exchange for some firewood, rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar and tea.

As the saying goes, "To get rich, build roads first." Without roads, Lijia Village remained poor. To go to school, one had to travel dozens of kilometers. Some people wanted their children to go to school but lacked the means. As a result, most of the children in the village were illiterate.

After arriving here, Yu Laoda first used Er Gouzi's name to take 100,000 yuan to pave a road that was barely passable. Then he took out several hundred thousand yuan to build a Hope Primary School, which was recognized by the higher-level government, and teachers were assigned to it.

It can be said that Er Gouzi and Yu Laoda brought about tremendous changes to the village. Even the 21-inch color TV in Lao Li's house was a gift from Yu Laoda, ostensibly to enrich the rural people's leisure life.

As a result, Er Gouzi and Yu Laoda's status in the village rose dramatically, and their prestige even surpassed that of the old Party Secretary. The villagers practically worshipped the two as living Buddhas.

The two-story building that Er Gouzi built at the same time as the school, although envied by the villagers, was not so conspicuous. Others built a four-story school for the village, so it was only natural for him to build a two-story building.

In previous years, Yu Laoda would come here every year under the pretext of recuperating his health and stay for one or two months, and Yu Laoba would usually accompany him.

Over time, the villagers stopped treating them as outsiders. Even if no one lived in the house for a year or two, no one would bother with it. Moreover, the villagers knew that there was nothing in the house except some broken metal.

What these villagers didn't know was how these so-called "living Buddhas" in their eyes felt when they had nothing better to do than dig up all the tombs of their ancestors and unearth a lot of armor and weapons from the late Ming Dynasty.

...

"Uncle Li, why are you being so polite with me? Boss Zhuang is a big boss, even bigger than my older brother. Just take the money..."

Yu Zhenping also wanted to make a deal with Zhuang Rui as soon as possible. Seeing that Old Li was repeatedly refusing to accept the money, he offered a word of advice.

"Then...then I'll accept it. Dazhuang, hurry up and take some men up the mountain to set traps. We'll hunt wild boars tomorrow to entertain our guests..."

After being persuaded by Yu Zhenping, Old Li finally accepted the 100 yuan. After seeing Zhuang Rui and the others to the door, he said to Yu Zhenping, "Xiao Ba, tell Er Gouzi to come home and visit when he has time. It's been almost two years, and he hasn't even come back to pay respects at his parents' graves..."

Upon hearing Old Li's words, Yu Zhenping's body stiffened, and he said somewhat awkwardly, "Uncle Li, I understand. I'll tell Brother Er Gou about it when I get back. Or, after we've set up the phone line in a while, you can give him a good scolding yourself..."

Others may not know, but Yu Zhenping knows perfectly well that Er Gouzi Li Wudi is no longer alive.

Two years ago, after Yu Laoliu's deal in Guangdong failed, Er Gouzi and his gang considered quitting. They approached Yu Laoda, wanting to divide the money they had earned over the years and then flee far away. However, Yu Laoda was still obsessed with the Tang Dynasty imperial tomb. The two sides could not reach an agreement, so he decided to kill him.

Yu Zhenping witnessed firsthand how Boss Yu drugged Er Gouzi and the others, got them drunk, and then strangled them to death one by one. Their bodies were used as fertilizer for the peach orchard.

This is also the main reason why the police failed to track down Lijia Village, because apart from Yu Laoda and Er Gouzi, only Yu Zhenping knew about this place.

At this moment, when Old Li mentioned Er Gouzi, even though Yu Zhenping was brave, he still felt a chill on the back of his neck and his scalp tingled, as if he were seeing that day again.

Holding the flashlight from Old Li's house, Yu Laoba quickened his pace noticeably, leading Zhuang Rui through the quiet village to the front of the two-story building.

Yu Zhenping took out a bunch of keys from his waist, opened the iron gate of the courtyard, and invited Zhuang Rui and the other man inside.

Upon entering the courtyard, Yu Zhenping flipped a switch somewhere, and a light bulb hanging above the courtyard immediately lit up. By the light, Zhuang Rui could see that the corners of the walls around the courtyard, where there was no concrete ground, were already overgrown with weeds.

Yu Zhenping stood in the courtyard, not in a hurry to open the door to the main room. Instead, he looked at Zhuang Rui and said, "Boss Zhuang, would you like to see the cauldron first, or the smaller items?"

Zhuang Rui didn't quite understand Yu Zhenping's meaning, but still said, "Of course we should see the cauldron first, Boss Ren. This is what we agreed on. If it's just those small items and not this important piece, I wouldn't bother making this trip..."

"Alright, let's look at the bronze cauldron first..."

Yu Zhenping nodded, called out to Zhuang Rui, and walked towards a small house against the wall on the east side of the courtyard.

This should be the kitchen, but apart from a stove and a brick table for placing bowls and chopsticks, there were no cooking utensils. Zhuang Rui was a little confused about what Yu Zhenping meant by bringing him here.

Yu Zhenping didn't say anything. After entering the house, he immediately went to the brick platform that was more than a meter above the ground and started tapping on it with his hand.