

## Constellation Door

### Chapter 21: Acting is the Real Strength (3)

Zhang Yuan's father might not have even cared that he had lost the saber-shaped stone. When his son had found it from some corner in the house, he had only taken it as an opportunity to beat the child up. Otherwise, Zhang Yuan's father wasn't someone who would take ancestral heirlooms seriously.

It was just a piece of broken stone, for heaven's sake! Even if it was an ancestral inheritance, it wasn't worth much. If Zhang Yuan hadn't found it, his father probably would not have known that it existed.

Trying to remember that specific incident, Li Hao walked to the corner of the courtyard. There were small stones piled up on one side. They were used to repair walls.

Li Hao looked at the stones but there was none that matched the one in his memory. He recalled that that particular stone had been similar to a knife.

'There is someone watching me, it might not be a good idea to rummage through things openly,' thought Li Hao.

Black Panther had been silent all this while. Now it whined in a low voice. It was the sound of fear. Black Panther whimpered again. Li Hao's body turned numb. He followed Black Panther's gaze. His heart pounded in fear.

The door of the house had been closed. He remembered closing it when he entered. But now, it was open slightly. A red tint appeared at the crack. 'The red shadow,' thought Li Hao anxiously.

His heart beat violently. The red shadow was here. He had only vaguely seen it on Zhang Yuan when he died. But how was it here? According to his knowledge, the red shadow should appear only on rainy days or other such bad weather. Why was it here at the Zhang family residence?

'Was it here at Zhang Yuan's house all this time searching for the saber?' Cold sweat beaded Li Hao's forehead.

He wasn't prepared to face the red shadow. It was too early. If it attacked and burned him, he could do nothing!

'Damn it! I didn't even contact the Night Patrollers!' thought Li Hao.

He was frozen on the spot. He was trembling. He wanted to run. But if he did, then whoever was watching him would know he could see the red shadow. That would create its own set of problems.

If they thought he couldn't see it like most ordinary people. He shouldn't have a reason to be afraid.

Thoughts flashed into his mind in a jumble. Black Panther was barking now.

"Be quiet!" he berated the dog.

"Who is it? I am the Chief Patrol Officer from the Inspection Office. Who's inside?" said Li Hao. He raised his Vortex Mk III and aimed. "Is someone there? Come out!"

He had seen a part of the red shadow; he was sure of it. He resisted the urge to go find it. He stared at the main door with his pistol ready.

Li Hao slowly approached the main door. He strode forward in the last few steps and kicked open the door. The loud bang was enough to attract the attention of whoever was nearby, but he didn't care.

There was a rustling sound outside. He looked at the dark street. "Who's there? I am the Chief Patrol Officer from the Inspection Office. If you don't reveal yourself, I will shoot!" said Li Hao.

His forehead was covered in sweat. His arms trembled. At his feet, Black Panther came to a halt. There was nothing there. Li Hao saw from the corner of his eyes that the red shadow was on his left. It was so close to him that it almost touched the side of his face.

Li Hao forced himself not to react. He pretended as if he didn't see it. He looked at the main house.

"No one?" Li Hao's voice almost faltered. "F\*uck!" cursed Li Hao. "Fortunately, none of my colleagues are here. Otherwise, I would be a laughingstock! I almost thought a murderer was hiding in the shadows."

He let out a breath and pretended to relax as if he couldn't see the red shadow at all. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and looked down at Black Panther. He smacked it gently on the head. "Silly dog! Why are you barking for no reason? You scared me to death!"

Black Panther was still scared. It looked at Li Hao as if asking whether he could see it. 'I see it!' thought Li Hao.

The red shadow was floating above the dog's head. When Li Hao had reached down to smack the dog on the head, his hand had passed through the red shadow, He felt nothing. Only an invisible coldness that seemed to seep into his arm.

He had not felt any obstruction. 'It almost looks invisible and feels invisible.'

Li Hao wanted to find out more. He felt bolder. He patted Black Panther's head so he could touch the red shadow again, just to make sure. It felt like nothing.

'Damn it! I guess that means firearms are useless!' thought Li Hao.

Li Hao was terrified but he maintained his composure. Whoever was watching him didn't know he could see the red shadow, he needed for them to think that way.

Li Hao smacked the dog on the head again. "Stupid dog! Bark again and I will leave you here! I was so scared I almost called Professor Yuan to send people from the Inspection Office and the academy."

## **Chapter 22: Acting is the Real Strength (4)**

Li Hao's hand once again went right through the red shadow without any obstruction. Li Hao felt more courageous.

The red shadow didn't attack him right away. It seemed to be observing him. He decided to pretend to not see it.

Li Hao looked at the dark, cold house and let out a breath. "It's getting late. The house is creepy. Maybe I should call Professor Yuan. I don't trust the Inspection Office. They closed Zhang Yuan's case and filed it as an accident as though nothing was unusual. I can ask Professor Yuan to get the Night Patrollers if nothing else works!" said Li Hao aloud.

Li Hao had seen the Night Patrollers only once from a far distance but he had never had any contact with them, ever. He was only talking aloud to scare whoever was watching.

If the red shadow had a consciousness, it would know who he was talking about. Li hao wanted to test the red shadow and the Night Patrollers were in league.

He actually felt much calmer now. Not only was he alive, but also testing things out!

Running away was not a choice. It was a stupid thing to do. If he ran away, the one watching him would know that he could see the red shadow. They might kill him!

According to what Li Hao had found out so far, the red shadow will only attack him on a rainy day. There must be a reason behind this. He didn't know what. But he might as well take a gamble for now.

Li Hao mumbled. "The Night Patrollers, all in black, do look scary. I wonder if they will answer Professor Yuan. The Inspection Office seems useless. Those black-robed people are the only ones I can rely on for now. I am not made for investigation, clearly. I was scared half to death just now! I can't really do this on my own, can I, Black Panther?"

Li Hao pretended to look dejected and took out his communicator. He gritted his teeth. "I will ask Professor Yuan for help," he declared.

Li Hao dialed Professor Yuan's number on his communicator. Li Hao trembled a little. The red shadow beside him began to flicker suddenly. A faint red thread spread and swooped from outside the courtyard walls and connected with the shadow.

Li Hao wondered if someone was calling the red shadow back because the next moment, the red shadow drifted away from him and disappeared.

Black Panther wagged its tail. It no longer looked scared. "Woof! Woof!" it barked softly as if telling Li Hao that everything was fine now.

Li Hao's face darkened. It meant that the red shadow and whoever was watching him were in league with each other. He had long suspected that the red shadow did not act on its own, now, he was sure.

Whoever was watching him from the courtyard could control the red shadow. They had probably gotten scared when he tried to call his professor to ask him to send the Night Patrollers and left.

Li Hao's method of intimidation had worked! But Li Hao was far from pleased. He was distressed. The red thread that had connected with the red shadow had somehow looked similar to the starlight that had appeared in his stomach when he drank the water.

However, Li Hao was not happy at all. The red threads that were spreading over were somewhat similar to the Starlight he had seen when he was drinking water, which was the mysterious force.

'Was the person outside a mysterious Super?' wondered Li Hao. 'If whoever that was could control the red shadow, why didn't they try to kill me? Were they testing me? One thing is clear, the red shadow can't be killed by a gun. But what if the person who controls it is killed? What will happen to the red shadow then?'

Li Hao felt a little hope. The red shadow was terrifying. But as long as it was a human who was controlling it, it wasn't invincible.

'Red shadow ... Mysterious person ...,' pondered Li Hao. He had also found out something strange. The moment he had touched the red shadow, the jade pendant on his chest had stirred. Li Hao wondered if the Starry Sky Sword could hurt the red shadow.

'Even if I can't find the saber-shaped, tonight wasn't lost in vain!' thought Li Hao excitedly. Maybe he could fight those people. Assuming that they didn't think he was important enough, maybe he could find a moment to strike. Otherwise, the red shadow could kill him in an instant.

'If I can get rid of whoever controls the red shadow, then it might be possible to fight the shadow itself with the Starry Sky Sword,' thought Li Hao, his eyes twinkling.

He now had hope. He was no longer afraid. Instead, he wanted revenge!

'However, I need to find out if this is the only red shadow. Is it the same one I saw on Zhang Yuan? Who is watching me? Probably some bigshot. But why?' Li Hao worried again.

He sighed. He had a little time to himself now. The people who were watching him might not be back for a while. Li Hao wanted to find the saber-shaped stone as soon as possible,

...

At the end of the street. The person under the ghost-mask hesitated. Should they leave or stay? If Li Hao really called the Night Patrollers, it would be troublesome.

It will create even greater problems. 'Forget it. It's unlikely he will get the Night Patrollers to come here. Even Yuan Shuo might not really come but it's wiser to avoid them for now.'

The masked person chose to leave. Not very far behind, the red shadow followed silently. The masked person didn't expect Li Hao to find anything at the Zhang residence anyway. They had turned the place upside down and still hadn't found anything. It was probably lost.

One thing was for sure. When Li Hao left the academy a year ago, he hadn't seen the red shadow. He just wasn't able to cope with the death of his friend.

The masked person ascertained that if Li Hao had seen something, he wouldn't have appeared so calm tonight. The masked person ruled out that possibility, at least.

## Chapter 23: Master and Disciple (1)

In the Zhang family's old house. In the small courtyard.

Even now, Li Hao trembled in fear. His time at the Inspection office had turned out to be fruitful, to say the least. If he was still a student of the Silver City Ancient Academy, he wouldn't have been able to compose himself and put on an act while sweating in panic.

"Hurry up, Black Panther," said Li Hao. "We have to find it fast and leave before they get back!"

Li Hao intended to use Black Panther for now. He was familiar with the Zhang family house but the dog had a more sensitive nose.

Black Panther raised its head and looked at Li Hao. He looked around and lowered his voice. "Look around," he said, pointing to his chest. "There should be something similar to this. You have a sharp nose, go search for it."

Li Hao's best hope was Black Panther. It might actually find what he was looking for. The dog had been very excited and eager when it saw the jade pendant. Li Hao wondered if that was why the dog had hung around in the first place. Had it sensed his jade pendant even before Li Hao got familiar with it?

Perhaps Black Panther could smell the stone too!

Zhang's family had lived in this house for a very long time. If the saber-shaped stone was to be found, it would be here.

The Black Panther was excited. He eagerly wagged its tail and ran around. It could only smell the stone from a close distance. If it didn't know better, it could miss it!

Black Panther's nose twitched. Its legs crouched. Its nose touched the ground and sniffed.

Li Hao thought that if he found the stone, he might get more benefits out of it. While Black Panther sniffed and searched, Li Hao didn't stay idle. He began to explore the courtyard.

The corners, the ground, the tree...

The people who controlled the red shadow might have already searched these places and found nothing. But Li Hao knew what the stone looked like, they didn't. They might not even know that the Zhang family's saber was actually a stone.

If Li hao told anyone that the jade pendant he wore around his neck was actually the Starry Sky Sword of the Li family, no one would believe him.

The way the song mentions the weapons in the Li and Zhang family, anybody would assume they are real swords which might have been passed down from generations. The imagination definitely painted them as fierce and domineering weapons.

Who could even guess that the Li family's sword was a small jade pendant and the Zhang family's saber was just an unremarkable piece of stone?

...

Twenty minutes had passed. Li Hao was getting anxious. What if he couldn't find it?

Had they already taken the stone? Or was it lost?

Even Black Panther was still sniffing around. If it was here, the dog should have been able to smell it by now.

Li Hao couldn't stay here forever. He had scared away his watchers for now, but that didn't mean they wouldn't be back. He couldn't keep searching here. He would be discovered sooner or later.

He stood in the middle of the courtyard and looked at the master bedroom and the second bedroom. 'If I were Zhang Yuan's father, where would I keep the stone?' Li Hao asked himself. 'That day, I am not sure if Uncle Zhang picked the stone up after he threw it to the ground. But even after that, I never saw it again when I came to this house. If it was still around, I would have seen it.'

'It didn't mean much to Uncle Zhang, that was for sure,' Li Hao ascertained. 'Otherwise, he wouldn't have thrown it around with that kind of attitude.'

He tried to recall the incident and the days after. 'After Zhang Yuan was beaten up by his father, he had refused to come out and play with me for three days. Did Uncle Zhang take the stone somewhere else?'

'What would he do with a mere stone?' wondered Li Hao. 'All I know is, the stone disappeared during that period. Otherwise, I would have seen it again.'

Li Hao sighed in frustration. He had been too young. He couldn't remember properly. What had happened in those three days?

If the stone was really lost, there would be no way to find it.

'Even Black Panther can't smell it. Is it too far away or is its sense of smell being interfered with?' wondered Li Hao. His eyes widened. There were two places where there were too many smells of things: The kitchen and the latrine pit.

Old houses like these were built with a latrine pit in the old days instead of a toilet. Li Hao remembered that the latrine pit and the kitchen were in the process of being repaired on that day. There was a possibility!

'Uncle Zhang... did you fix the kitchen first or the latrine pit?' wondered Li Hao.

Li Hao determined that if the stone was in this house, it was most probably in one of those two places!

## **Chapter 24: Master and Disciple (2)**

Li Hao walked to the kitchen first.

He did not want to venture into the latrine unless he couldn't find the stone in the kitchen. If the stone was in the latrine, Li Hao didn't think he wanted to find it anyhow. He didn't want to soak it in the water and... he couldn't even give that to Black Panther to drink, much less himself!

He had the jade Starry Sky Sword anyway!

"Black Panther, follow me!" called Li Hao as he walked to the kitchen. Black Panther ran after him enthusiastically.

The kitchen hadn't been used in so many years. When he pushed the door open, he saw a dusty large pot on the stove. The iron pot had long rusted and the wooden lid was rotten.

"Black Panther, see if you can find it there. Please don't mind the smell," said Li Hao, pointing to the large pot on the stove.

The kitchen hadn't been touched in many years. There was a faint smell of dust commingled with the smell of oil and smoke. Black Panther was a little dizzy with all these smells. It had sniffed this place before but hadn't found anything.

Black Panther jumped at Li Hao's words and approached the pot. It sniffed it. The tip of its nose was covered with dust and soot.



Li Hao walked around and looked into containers. He paid close attention to things that had been repaired around a decade ago. Only in those things could he expect for the stone to be hidden.

The people who controlled the red shadow might now have paid attention to the rusted things in the kitchen. Would the saber be hidden here somewhere?

Li Hao obviously wasn't careless. He knew that those people who were after the stone took this seriously as well. He saw signs of the kitchen having been searched, even the ashes under the stove had been stirred. If the ashes were undisturbed, it wouldn't look like this

'They were looking for it too. They didn't even spare the furnace. They are really very dedicated,' thought Li Hao,

Black Panther found nothing. Li Hao was disappointed. 'Is it really in the latrine? Disgusting!'

As he was lamenting at the prospect, Li Hao's eyes rested on the chimney over the stove. The kitchen of old houses was all equipped with brick chimneys. Without a chimney, it would be hard to cook with all the smoke.

Li Hao suddenly had an idea. 'Was Uncle Zhang repairing the chimney when he hit Zhang Yuan that day?' He vaguely remembered it.

Li Hao looked at Black Panther. The dog was not very big, it was still a pup. 'Could it climb a chimney?'

Black Panther was still sniffing the pot. Li Hao carried it and placed it at the mouth of the chimney. "Try and see if you find anything here."

Black Panther looked at him helplessly. But it sniffed the area. Its nose twitched. A familiar smell filled its nose.

"Woof! Woof!" barked Black Panther happily.

Li Hao was ecstatic. 'It's really here!'

Those people probably had searched around the chimney and hadn't found anything. But their red shadow couldn't really go through bricks! They might have expected some kind of a box, or a small compartment to hide the stone. Who would have thought the Zhang family hid their ancestral heirloom in a brick chimney?!

The gray walls were already flaking off. There were bricks on the inside. Li Hao scraped at it and more of the outer layer came off. There was a small space inside, a very insignificant space. But it was there. Li Hao's eyes lit up.

'This is it!' he thought. Li Hao vaguely remembered the stone. It was no bigger than a fist. He scraped more of the wall and found the stone inside. 'Uncle Zhang did respect his ancestors!'

Li Hao didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. He had disliked it when Zhang Yuan's father had hit his son for this. But now, he was thankful to the old man for hiding this here.

Of the eight families, Li Hao didn't have any idea what their families did with their heirlooms. Li family's sword had been easier to pass down because it was only a small pendant that can be worn around the neck. But it must not have been easy to come up with a way to explain this piece of stone while passing it down to other generations.

'Perhaps it had looked different before?' thought Li Hao. 'Maybe it turned to stone when it was passed down to Uncle Zhang.'

Li Hao had no energy to think about that for now. He looked at the stone in his hand happily. It hadn't been easy to find it!

Li Hao looked at the chimney. He wished there was a way to return it to the way it was before. The place where he had scraped the wall was very obvious.

Having worked at the Inspection Office, he had learnt a thing or two. He knew that those people would be back to see why Li Hao had come here in the first place.

## **Chapter 25: Master and disciple (3)**

With a part missing from the chimney, those people might guess everything!

If Li Hao had only been a student, he would have taken the stone and left the place as soon as possible. And if the people with the red shadow came back, they would be able to find out about the Zhang family's saber. Li Hao would have been in big trouble.

'What should I do?' thought Li Hao. He couldn't leave it like this. He couldn't put the stone saber back either. Even if he placed it back and made it look like nothing had happened, they would find out anyway. The people with the red shadow were smart. They had been monitoring this place for a year. There was no way they couldn't see something different about it.

Li Hao frowned. He could replace it with another stone! But still, it would raise doubts.

'Should I destroy the chimney completely?' he thought. 'But that would be too much! I can find a similar stone, then destroy the chimney. Even if they rebuilt it, nothing will be missing!'

In his training, Li Hao had of course learnt the basic skill of making sure whether the evidence was genuine or not and how to destroy evidence. He had also learnt to recreate evidence.

Li Hao thought more about it. This house had been abandoned for many years. No one was around. He didn't have to rush.

He let out a breath. It was good that he had found what he came here for. But Li Hao realized that he needed to trouble his professor again.

...

Li Hao walked out of the kitchen and dialed Professor Yuan's number. His professor accepted the call very fast.

"Are you alright?" asked Professor Yuan.

"Hello, professor. I am fine," said Li Hao, thankful for his concern. "Professor, I didn't find anything significant in Zhang Yuan's house but it seems that some people have been watching the place. His house had been ransacked. Somebody has been inside. Do you think it was the murderer?"

"What are you thinking?" said Professor Yuan.

"If the murderer was here, what were they looking for? Did they find it?" said Li Hao. "My words don't have much weight. Could I trouble you to send people over from the Inspection Office? If they make a big commotion about it and maybe try to demolish a part of the house, the person responsible might be alerted by it and could be lured out."

'Demolish the house? Was there a need for that?' wondered Professor Yuan. Zhang Yuan's house might be already old and it was not a crime scene, so demolishing it wasn't that big of a deal.

Professor Yuan wondered if Li Hao had actually discovered something. Did he really intend to lure out the murderer?

Li Hao was sure that the demolition of the house would attract the enemy's attention. It didn't matter. The more noise, the better. Even better if there was actually a mole at the Inspection Office.

He only needed to do one thing now: replace the saber stone with a similar looking stone. Even if the enemy restored everything later, they won't be suspicious.

The people with the red shadow might guess that Li Hao had found some clues but they won't know for sure whether he had found the stone.

That was what Li Hao wanted. He wanted to make them suspicious but still doubtful. That uncertainty would work in his favor and give him more time to blow up the case so that the Night Patrollers had no choice but to get involved.

'The people with the red shadow themselves have been laying low because they don't want the information to be public. I can do something opposite to that!' thought Li Hao. 'It would attract attention to myself but I want to cause the commotion to avenge my friend. Besides, the attention might help me finally get in contact with the Night Patrollers!'

Li Hao finally made his decision. He might be able to get in contact with the Night Patrollers, after all. He could offer the footprints outside the house as evidence to his superiors. It would cause a lot of commotion. But that was what he needed for now.

Professor Yuan asked a few questions to confirm if this was what he wanted. He trusted his student. He knew Li Hao was smart and he wouldn't do something like this for no reason.

Since Li Hao seemed to know what he was doing, Professor Yuan decided to support him.