

Constellation Door

Chapter 3: The Li Family's Swordsmanship (1)

Li Hao returned to his seat in the office.

He glanced at the calendar on his table. 12th July, 1730.

"It's been almost a year!" he muttered.

"What's been almost a year?" asked Chen Na curiously.

Li Hao smiled. "Oh... I meant it's almost another year of being here at the Inspection Office."

"You have a good memory." Chen Na didn't pay much attention to him after that.

Li Hao didn't add to his words. He remembered everything. He had joined the Inspection Office on 1st of August, 1729. He had dropped out of the academy on precisely 23rd of July. He couldn't bear to be in the academy any longer.

On 22nd of July, 1729, another self-immolation had occurred. Zhang Yuan, a Grade Two student at the academy, had been the victim. He had burned to death outside his dormitory room.

Silver City Ancient Academy had cared more for the school's reputation than of the death. The Inspection Office had obliged and filed the case as a mere accident. The case had been closed and filed away. Very few people knew that a student of Silver City Ancient Academy had burned to death.

Zhang Yuan's parents were both dead and he didn't have any close relatives. It had been easy for the matter to be suppressed and forgotten.

Shortly after, Li Hao had dropped out. His mentor had guessed that it was connected to Zhang Yuan's death. Li Hao and Zhang Yuan had been good friends.

'Zhang Yuan.' Li Hao could remember everything as though it had happened yesterday. The red shadow had seemed to grab Zhang Yuan's soul. It looked as though the blood-red flames came from it. The others hadn't been able to see it. But Li Hao could. He had seen the pain, the struggle and the collapse of his friend.

He had wanted to step forward and help. Zhang Yuan had opened and closed his mouth as if wanting to say something. But no sound had come out.

The others might have thought it was a cry for help. But Li Hao had known better.

“Run.”

He had told Li Hao to escape. He was telling him not to get too close. Zhang Yuan hadn't died inside the dormitory. At that time, he was only wearing his underwear, preparing to go to sleep. He had got out of the bed and ran outside the dormitory room in extreme pain. He had been heading to Li Hao's room.

Zhang Yuan hadn't even been able to scream. He had smashed the tile on the wall with his might as he endured the pain and the burning. The commotion had woken them up. A few of the students, along with Li Hao, had rushed out of their rooms to check what was wrong.

Was Zhang Yuan asking for help? Li Hao didn't think so.

He was very sure that Zhang Yuan had rushed out of his room and created a commotion to reach Li Hao. So, he could tell his friend to run.

'14 years,' Li Hao lamented. They had known each other for fourteen years. They hadn't just met in the academy as everyone assumed. They had been friends since childhood. They were the best of friends.

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Both of them were of quiet disposition so they didn't make a big deal of explaining their friendship to anyone at all. Zhang Yuan, just before his death, had gathered every ounce of will to find Li Hao one last time to give him a message: Run!

The case of Zhang Yuan's self-immolation was brushed under the rug and forgotten. Li Hao was his only close friend and he was never questioned.

'Zhang Yuan had told me to run. Was it just the fear of the moment or did Zhang Yuan know something? Was he warning me about the red shadow's next target?' These questions had always remained in Li Hao's mind.

He couldn't imagine how much pain Zhang Yuan had been in when he had tried to warn Li Hao. But Li Hao felt that everything was not so simple. What if he was the red shadow's next target?

'Six people, including me, maybe seven. What do we all have in common?' wondered Li Hao. 'Other than me and Zhang Yuan, there is nothing common connecting us to the previous victims. Are the targets chosen randomly or is there a pattern that I can't see clearly?'

Li Hao rubbed his forehead and flipped through the documents in front of him. These were the files of the six people which included several clues that he had collected over the past year.

The first person had died ten years ago. Li Hao didn't have a way to figure out whether there had been more deaths before that. It was not easy to look for details about cases from ten years ago and even before that.

'Common ground... common ground... gender? Age? Profession? Identity?' Li Hao flipped through the documents repeatedly. He did not find anything common at all. The people were completely unrelated in any sense.

'Why did the blood shadow want to kill them? Were they a threat to it, or is there another motive?' Endless questions filled his mind.

Li Hao was very invested in these cases not only because he felt he was in danger but also because he wanted to avenge his friend. No one cared about Zhang Yuan's death, but he did!

That was why he wanted to get involved with the Night Patrollers. He could only find more clues if he could somehow contact them. Li Hao did not expect the Night Patrollers to fight and kill the red shadow. He didn't even know if that was possible. But they were his only source of information about this thing. If not for that, Li Hao would have found a way to kill the red shadow himself!

"Li Hao, are you digging for information about those people again?" asked Chen Na. She noticed that he was still flipping through the same documents that he had with him every day.