

# STAR GATE

## - Chapter 11: Knowing How To Act Is Real Strength (I)

Night had fallen. Zhang Yuan's house was on an old street outside Openlight neighborhood. Li Hao loved playing on the old streets of town as a young boy. But as Silver City developed, parts of the historic section were dismantled and merchants departed. It'd fallen to disuse and few were the people who visited these days.

Most of the residents had moved away—it was quieter than Openlight.

House lights were still glimpsed in a few structures lining the street, but the general air of stillness only served to cast the surroundings in an eerie light. If time had permitted, Li Hao would've proceeded methodically—drinking some sword water everyday and slowly growing stronger before attempting anything else.

Unfortunately, time was not on his side.

A delay of just one day might mean an uptick in danger. While he would be stronger if things went according to plan, the sword water only enhanced physical strength. It wouldn't give him mystical abilities to handle the paranormal shadow.

There was only one goal with this visit, and that was to see if the stone blade was still there.

If it was, that would be very good news for Li Hao. If not, then perhaps the faction behind the scarlet shadow had retrieved it. It would also mean that his sword may be exposed and that someone already had their sights set on it.

Panther followed soundlessly by Li Hao's side. The little black dog was an inconspicuous sight in the darkness. Their footsteps echoed softly through the

street and Li Hao looked at one house in particular without a change in expression. An official paper seal was stuck over the front door.

This was Zhang Yuan's home.

He could already tell that there was no one here; neither did Panther issue a warning. All the same, he wasn't going to pin his hopes on the dog. Li Hao took out a communicator when he was less than one hundred meters from the front door and dialed a number.

The faint glow from the communicator illuminated the young man's face in the gloom.

*Beep beep beep.* A resonant voice quickly squawked, "Just look at the hour! Have you thought things through and want to come back because you can't hack it at the Inspectorate?"

The speaker's very loud voice echoed on the dark street since Li Hao had hit the speaker function. He'd been slightly apprehensive about things to come, but suddenly felt much more reassured. The young man responded respectfully, "I'm not considering that idea for now, Teacher."

"Then the hell you calling me for!" The voice shifted with irritation.

"Teacher, I've investigated Zhang Yuan's self-immolation case for the past year and discovered something off about it. Zhang Yuan might not have died in an accident!"

"Oh?"

Li Hao's face was calm in the dark, yet his expression twisted slightly.

"There's been more than one self-immolation victim over the years. Although they seem unrelated, there's actually a subtle connection between them. I haven't identified any concrete clues yet though."

The other side of the communicator fell silent. Li Hao was in front of Zhang Yuan's family home and continued softly as he looked at the ragged paper seals. "I'm in front of Zhang Yuan's house right now. I want to see if there's anything that points to him being murdered, that his death wasn't an accident."

"Li Hao!" came an old man's shout from the other side. "I know about Zhang Yuan's matter. Based on what you're saying, you shouldn't be there so recklessly if this is a murder. Be wary of accidents!"

He continued in a loud roar, "Stay there for a second, I'll send word to the Inspectorate and Institute. Help will be there shortly if you need it!"

Yuan Shuo didn't need his former student to spell everything out. Li Hao was calling him to say that Zhang Yuan's death wasn't an accident, that it was likely murder, and that he was in front of Zhang Yuan's house as they spoke. The professor immediately grasped that it was potentially a dangerous situation!

Right now, Li Hao needed a show of strength sufficient to intimidate dangers that might lurk in the dark. He didn't need his teacher to do anything or say anything—it was enough that the professor knew where Li Hao was and that he was investigating Zhang Yuan's case.

It was adequate that a heavyweight of the Veteris Institute was aware of the matter. No one would dare take brash action any longer. Otherwise, more trouble would ensue if Li Hao's death incited the fury of the old man at the Institute.

The rumor mill said that Li Hao and Yuan Shuo had completely broken ties with each other. The opposite was plainly the truth. Yuan Shuo's voice carried a great distance in the hushed street. If anyone was keeping an eye on the area, they would definitely hear the old man's words that people from the Veteris Institute and Inspectorate might come.

.....

As Li Hao conversed with his former professor, the docile Panther suddenly bit his pant leg. While the young man didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, the dog's senses were keener than his. It might've picked up something, or his teacher's words might've caused those hidden in the shadows to move and expose themselves.

There really was someone conducting surveillance in the area.

Still, that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, it might mean that Zhang Yuan's stone blade was still at the house.

Yuan Shuo was still squawking from the communicator, but Li Hao objected with a smile. "It's not that bad, Teacher. I'm just calling to give you a brief overview. The more important matter is that I've applied to be on the protection detail for the field study in a few days. I might be accompanying you in the field."

"You?" A surprised Yuan Shuo laughed heartily. "That's good! I'll wait for you! It so happens that this time's field survey is a bit complicated. You learned a lot by my side for two years, but you never put any of it into practice!

"Li Hao, why don't we treat this as your field practice class? If you perform well, I'll make you a supernumerary student. Although we have many rules at the Institute, if you accomplish certain things during the field survey, I can have you graduate all the same!

"If you still decide to stay at the Inspectorate, you'll rise two ranks with a diploma in hand. You'll be guaranteed a position as a first rank inspector and have a much brighter future ahead of you!"

Lu Yun smiled. "Teacher, let's talk about that later. I'm entering the house first to see if there's any clues. It goes without saying that I'll find a way to rejoin

the Institute once I've gotten to the bottom of Zhang Yuan's case and caught the culprit."

"That works too! Call me any time if you run into trouble," Yuan Shuo reminded. "There's nothing I can't take care of. If the Inspectorate and Institute can't do anything, there's always your teacher here. As long as you win glory in the future, I'll go all out if need be and send certain powerhouses to your rescue!"

Li Hao's heart shook and filled with wordless gratitude. He knew what his teacher spoke of. If need be, the powerhouses he would send were likely the Night Watchers.

He hadn't said anything to his teacher beforehand because he worried the issue might implicate his teacher if it grew bigger. But with the professor's sharp wits, the first thing he thought of was also supernatural factors at play upon hearing that Zhang Yuan's self-immolation wasn't an accident.

That's why he spoke of *certain* powerhouses. Despite Yuan Shuo being a preeminent professor, the Night Watchers weren't a group that would help on anyone's say so. Li Hao was handling a private matter, not business, so it would cost a hefty price to request their aid.

"I understand, thank you so much!" Li Hao hung up and ripped off the paper seals on the doorframe, opening a door that'd been closed for a year.

.....

Silence returned to the street outside after Li Hao entered the house with his little black dog. Not a peep was heard for a very long time.

A pair of eyes glowing with a mysterious blue hue faded in and out of the void. A black figure that seemed part of the night moved through the darkness. It was black from head to toe, apart from the blue eyes that looked like they

floated through the gloom. It wore the mask of a vicious ghost, fully obscuring its features and making it impossible to determine its gender.

“Li Hao, Zhang Yuan’s classmate, best friends. Formerly a second year student at the Veteris Institute, he withdrew from school and joined the Inspectorate after Zhang Yuan’s death. He has investigated the incident ever since and made a report to Wang Jie, department head of Classified Affairs, earlier today. He has connected the six self-immolation incidents and wishes to treat them as one joint case.”

Information about Li Hao flashed through the black figure’s mind. The young man came under surveillance when he withdrew from school last year and seemed to be a key character himself. However, that matter wasn’t part of the black shadow’s jurisdiction, so it didn’t know anything more.

It had standing orders to leave Li Hao alone if possible; the boy would be useful later on.

*Careful thought is required before I do anything to him.* Had Li Hao been talking to his teacher Yuan Shuo earlier?

Yuan Shuo was a premier elder of the Veteris Institute. Department head of the Ancient Civilizations major, he worked with the Night Watchers and was one of the few in Silver City who could directly speak to the mysterious organization.

“I wouldn’t touch him even if no one told me so.” The black shadow drifted close to the Zhang family home. Why had Li Hao gone inside?

To search for clues?

Zhang Yuan had burned to death at the Institute—what clues would there be in his home? Or was the young man looking for something?

As for what, the black figure didn’t know. His mission was simply to keep an eye on everyone that approached the house.

.....

“Aooorrrr!” Panther kept up a low whine as it frantically shook Li Hao’s pant leg, trying to tell the young man something.

Li Hao remained composed, but inwardly highly vigilant. Was someone approaching him? Had his phone call with his teacher not been enough to dissuade them? He didn’t say anything, just caressed the dog’s head.

After some moments comforting Panther, he looked at the old house that’d fallen into disrepair.

He currently stood in a moderately sized yard that stretched before the main house. Zhang Yuan’s room was off to one side and the kitchen on the other. Li Hao was very familiar with the premises as he’d often come when he was a child. Even though its modest size was too limiting for older children, he’d still visited often before his parents passed away.

His primary goal this time was the stone blade of the Zhangs.

Taking a look around, he could tell that someone had been by, despite pristine appearances. Some items were shifted from their positions. Nothing looked out of place, but Li Hao could clearly tell that they’d been moved.

He was likely the most familiar with this house apart from Zhang Yuan. Even the old tree in the yard had been tampered with. It looked to have been dug up by the roots and replanted into the ground.

“If the stone blade is still here, it won’t be in the primary suite or second bedroom, that’s for sure!” With all the times that Li Hao visited the house, he would’ve seen the blade if it was hidden in these two spots. He’d rummaged through plenty of closets and drawers as he’d treated the Zhangs’ like it was his own place.

“The last time I saw the blade was when Uncle Zhang beat Little Yuan. I remember he threw it to the ground, but I don’t know if he picked it up again later.” It seemed to Li Hao that Zhang Yuan had fished the blade out of a random corner. Possibly even Uncle Zhang hadn’t remembered and used it as an excuse to deliver a hefty beating when his kid touched it. He probably didn’t think much of the family heirloom.

What inheritance from the ancestors??

Even if it was, it wasn’t worth anything. Who wanted that piece of junk? If it wasn’t for Zhang Yuan finding it again, Uncle Zhang might not have ever recalled that there was such a stone.

Li Hao traced the indistinct path of his hazy memories and walked toward a corner of the yard. There were a bunch of stones there meant to repair walls with.