

STAR GATE

----- Chapter 13: Master and Disciple (I)

The Zhang family home.

Inside a small yard.

Li Hao sweated profusely and his heart pounded with fear. Spending a year at the Inspectorate was proving to be a valuable experience. If the Veteris version of him stood here, he might not have been able to maintain his composure and pull off a grand play of deception.

“I need to search as quickly as possible and leave. What if the other guy comes back?? Panth!”

He looked at the dog. Li Hao was very familiar with the house, but the more familiar one was in a place, the less likely one was able to find an item of interest. He'd brought the little black dog to borrow its canine strengths.

Panther tilted its head back at Li Hao.

The young man scanned the yard and kept his voice down, pointing at the jade sword in front of his chest. “Sniff around, there should be something here that's similar to this. You've got a sharp nose, see if you can find it.”

That's right, perhaps Panther would have some luck. The dog had been very taken with the jade sword. In fact, Li Hao was beginning to suspect that Panther had found its way to his door because of Stellaris.

It just lacked the chance to lick it before because he'd never taken it out. Today was its first opportunity.

In that case, could Panth sniff out the stone blade?

The Zhangs had always resided here, so if the stone blade still existed, it would most likely be inside the house. No one carried around a rock for fun.

More?

Panther understood! Newfound energy moved its stiff limbs. The little black dog didn't immediately smell it around them because it had to be very close to catch the barest whiff. If it didn't know that these items were special, it would easily overlook the strange shapes.

But since it did, Panther bent its mind to the task. Nose twitching ferociously and front legs crouched on the ground, it diligently sniffed the ground in a close search. If Li Hao had another one of those things, then perhaps good things would be in store for the human's furry friend!

Li Hao was just as busy while Panther conducted its examination. He looked through the yard, the walls, the ground...

The scarlet shadow had most certainly looked at the same places, but Li Hao surmised that they didn't know what the stone blade looked like. They might not even know it was stone.

After all, how likely was it that anyone would believe the cross around his neck was the sword of the Lis? It was a cognitive conflict!

If one went by the folk song, then surely the sword of the Lis and blade of the Zhangs were weapons that could slice through metal like butter. Of course they were domineering, awe-inspiring, and gleamed with radiance!

But in reality, the sword of the Lis was a tiny jade pendant and the blade of the Zhangs was an insignificant rock.

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Ten minutes... twenty minutes...

Li Hao grew anxious when he failed to locate what he was looking for. Was it gone? Had the scarlet shadow found it? Or was it actually lost?

Not only did he come up empty-handed, but so did Panther return with nothing after making a complete circle. The dog would smell something if it was close by, right?

“Nothing!” Li Hao couldn’t stay here too long. Although he’d frightened the person off, they might come back. He couldn’t keep searching either, that would expose his true intentions.

He stood in the center of the yard and looked at the primary and secondary bedrooms. If he was Uncle Zhang, where would he put the rock? Perhaps he’d gain a new lead if he put himself in Uncle Zhang’s shoes.

“Uncle Zhang didn’t care about it then and randomly threw it in the street. In my later visits, I didn’t specifically check for a blade-shaped stone on the ground. But I came here often and don’t think I ever saw it. I would’ve seen it at some point if it was still here, no?”

“Uncle Zhang probably didn’t keep it safe. He wouldn’t have thrown it away so uncaringly if that was the case.” Li Hao swiftly replayed his memories. Albeit hazy around the edges, he could still vaguely recall them when he thought hard.

“Little Yuan stayed home for a few days after he was punished and it was a few more before I visited again. Did Uncle Zhang move the stone blade during this time? What would he do with a rock? But it’s very likely that it disappeared then, or I would’ve seen it again during all those years.” Li Hao thumped his fist on his head. He’d been too young to remember anything clearly.

Had something happened in those days, or maybe Uncle Zhang found the rock annoying and thrown it away?

If he had... then there was no way Li Hao would be able to find it.

One rock, more than a dozen years. Who knew where it’d been swept to by now?

“Panth doesn’t smell it... Is it too far away, or is something interfering with the scent? Being too far away is self-explanatory, but if the scent is being interfered with...” Li Hao’s eyes rapidly darted around.

There were two places that would most likely interfere with scent—the kitchen or the outhouse!

Outhouses, not flushing toilets, were found in old houses like these. Of course, it was *much* more preferable that it didn’t come down to that.

“Oh... right, I think Little Yuan’s outhouse and kitchen were repaired when we were children. Could a rock be used for material then?” Li Hao dubiously regarded his speculation; it was his best bet. If he still came up empty-handed, then he was really plum out of luck. “Did Uncle Zhang fix the kitchen or outhouse first after he beat Little Yuan?”

No idea!

But if the stone blade was still at the Zhangs, it was very likely to be in one of those two areas.

Li Hao headed for the kitchen without hesitation. He would only check the outhouse as a last resort. And if that stone blade really was in the outhouse... Well, Panth could drink its fill of that water in the future!

He had Stellaris!

“I hope it’s in the kitchen... Panth, with me!” He softly called the dog to him.

The kitchen had laid unused for many years; a massive stove for woks came into view through the door. Its wok was rusty and the lid decaying.

“Take a sniff!” Li Hao pointed at the stove. “Don’t be distracted by the smells!”

Even though it’d been neglected for many years, it was once heavily utilized for a long period of time. Extremely faint scents of fire and grease still lingered in the air. It might interfere with the dog’s efforts.

Panther did indeed wander around with confusion after entering the kitchen, particularly as there was a thick scent of mold in the area. It checked the premises earlier, but found nothing. Given Li Hao's command, it adroitly jumped onto the stove and sniffed it closely.

A black layer of ash soon colored its nose while Li Hao also diligently searched where he could. Places that'd undergone more recent repairs could be ignored, his key focus was on places worked on a dozen years ago. Only those might use the stone blade and it was those areas that the faction behind the scarlet shadow couldn't be bothered with.

After all, why would the Zhangs hide their precious blade in a place like this?

After circling the kitchen, he found that the scarlet shadow and its backers immensely valued the stone blade. There were signs of search even here—even the ashes in the stove had been rifled through.

Ashes that'd lain untouched for years wouldn't look like what he saw. These had been disturbed at some point in time.

"They're also looking for it and made sure to check the fireplace. They were very thorough!"

Would the Zhang family heirloom be covered in ashes? Li Hao didn't think so, but they'd still conscientiously sifted through it!

Panther came up empty-handed once more, disappointing the young man. Was it really in the outhouse?

Gross!

Battling growing distaste in his heart, Li Hao's eyes flicked toward the large chimney over the stove. Chimneys of brick were commonplace in kitchens of old houses. Without it, the kitchen was uninhabitable when cooking.

“Um... the kitchen?” Li Hao suddenly recalled something. Hadn’t the kitchen undergone some work after Uncle Zhang beat Little Yuan? He wasn’t sure, but it seemed to be coming to him!

Being a small dog, Panther sniffed around the stove. It was unable to climb up the chimney that was the height of a person.

“Can it be there?” Li Hao jumped nimbly onto the stove and grabbed the dog by the scruff of its neck. “Sniff there!”

He raised Panther high and moved it around like a metal probe. Resignation filled the dog’s eyes and it dutifully stuck its nose out.

Its nose twitched at a spot one meter over the stove. A familiar scent wafted into its nostrils.

“Arf? Arf arf!” Panther lit up, prompting Li Hao to brighten as well.

Had they found it? Was it really here?

The chimney... had probably been overlooked by the faction behind the scarlet shadow. Who could’ve fathomed that the Zhangs would stick the family legacy into a chimney?? They’d even once searched around the structure! Or perhaps the scarlet shadow had looked around. It was formless and intangible, possibly able to go through walls and floors. It’d likely searched the walls and floors, but the faction was focused on cracks, cubbyholes, boxes, or chests.

Maybe it’d never occurred to them that the blade they were looking for was a rock.

Li Hao stared at a protrusion in the chimney with bright eyes. Was the blade in there?

Mottled plaster had fallen off in pieces, revealing some of the bricks inside. More plaster flaked off when Li Hao touched it, revealing a stone the color of dirt. It wasn't fully apparent, but the young man beamed when he saw it!

"That's it!" His heart raced. Although he couldn't see the entire stone, what it should look like floated to the forefront of his mind. It was a rock shaped like a blade—not too big, just a bit larger than a fist.

"Uncle Zhang... really respected his ancestors, huh!" Li Hao suddenly didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Uncle Zhang had given his son a hefty beating because of this stone, then immediately shoved it into his kitchen chimney! Was this how one was supposed to respect the family ancestors' wishes?

If the Zhang ancestors came back to life, they would likely promptly die again of anger.

While it was unknown how the other families treated their inheritances, the Li family sword was treasured as a family heirloom. It was incredible that the Zhangs had managed to pass on a rock for so many generations!

Or... perhaps it hadn't looked like a rock before? Maybe it slowly petrified until it became a stone by the time of Uncle Zhang's generation?

There was no time to think about it, neither did Li Hao really care to. He frowned at the stone stuck in the chimney.

He'd found it! But how was he supposed to get it out?

It wasn't that he couldn't, but that if he did, it would leave very apparent marks on the chimney. A year at the Inspectorate taught him that once a place was disturbed, scarlet shadow and its backer were sure to inspect it when they came back. What did Li Hao want with this inconspicuous chimney?

And once they saw that it was missing a stone, they might very quickly realize what had happened!

