

# STAR GATE

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## ----- Chapter 14: Master and Disciple (II)

If Li Hao was still the Veteris student of old, he would take the stone blade without a second thought. But when the scarlet shadow came back, it might connect the dots that the blade of the Zhangs was the stone that'd been dug out. He'd be in for it then!

A world of hurt would descend once the scarlet shadow knew that the blade was in Li Hao's hands. It might even deduce that Li Hao had guessed certain things and knew about the eight families. He would expose everything with a single action!

*What should I do now?* He couldn't walk away after finding it. Not only was the Zhang blade very possibly a treasure, but it might have other uses too. The scarlet shadow's faction must value it highly. They wouldn't run the risk of discovery and still be keeping the house under watch a year later if not. Li Hao frowned. Should he take the stone blade and fill the hole with another rock?

However, a clumsy cover-up would out him all the same. The differences between old and new marks were readily apparent with a single glance.

"The only option is to completely destroy the kitchen and obliterate all traces of evidence. I have to make it impossible for them to investigate. The best is if I destroy the chimney—but would that be too forced?"

"I should find another stone, preferably with the same shape, *then* destroy the chimney. Even if they reconstruct the scene, they won't be tipped off by anything like a missing part."

Li Hao possessed the basic tools of an inspector's trade. Over the past year, he'd learned how to destroy evidence, fabricate evidence, and throw people off track. If he simply destroyed the kitchen, the enemy might be able to rebuild the original chimney and realize that there was a piece missing.

He was in no hurry to take the blade once he settled on a proper course of action. It'd rested here, overlooked, all these years. He didn't need to rush in right this very second.

Li Hao breathed out gently. *Finding it was the most important task. I can wait a little longer. But I'll have to trouble teacher for what I'm about to do next.*

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Li Hao dialed his teacher's communicator when he walked out of the kitchen. It was answered almost on the first ring.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, teacher!" Li Hao responded gratefully and skipped the pleasantries.

"Teacher, there's nothing at Zhang Yuan's house, but someone's been keeping an eye on it. His house has been searched through—do you think the murderer is looking for something?"

Yuan Shuo quickly grasped the underlying context. "What are you thinking?"

"Can we lure them out of hiding?" Li Hao quickly asked. "Since they looked through Zhang Yuan's house and still watch it, I'm guessing they haven't found what they're looking for. My word doesn't carry much weight at the Inspectorate as I'm low on the totem pole. Could I ask teacher to have the Inspectorate send people and raise a fuss? They can dismantle part of the Zhang home and alarm the enemy. That might lure out his killers."

*Dismantle part of the Zhang family home? Is there a need for that?* Yuan Shuo blinked.

Granted, it wasn't the scene of the crime and that part of the city was slated for general rebuilding. It wouldn't mean much if the house was really torn down. Had his former student discovered something and had another goal in mind? Or did he really want to induce something to reveal itself?

Partially tearing down Zhang Yuan's home would very likely raise the scarlet shadow's attention, but Li Hao was fine with that. The bigger the operation, the better—and it was best if there indeed was a mole in the Inspectorate.

An enemy fully aware of the situation perfectly suited his purposes.

He needed to accomplish only one thing—substitute a stone of the same size for the stone blade. Once that was done, the enemy could restore the scene to their heart's content and still come up empty-handed.

The scarlet shadow's faction would only guess that Li Hao suspected something, not that he'd taken anything. All they would conclude was that he possessed strong deductive abilities and found some clues.

He had to sow seeds of suspicion amid the dirt of uncertainty. He needed to play for time and ensure the matter grew bigger so it would draw in the Night Watchers.

“Exposing shadowy dealings to the public eye... Neither the Night Watchers nor the enemy seem willing to appear in public. Nor do they want this to turn into a topical issue. But as an ordinary person, I need more eyeballs on it. Maybe I can swing it so that it has nothing to do with me. They'll think I'm a smart person who doesn't know the secrets beneath the surface.

“If I blow up the situation out of desire to avenge my friend... Yes, that also suits my character!” Li Hao came to a final decision after weighing up the pros and cons.

This might catch the Night Watchers' eye earlier than expected. He could potentially interact with them close at hand and he might report that he'd found some clues—like the people keeping watch outside.

Of course, he hadn't seen anything remotely out of the ordinary, just that there was a person outside! He'd seen a footprint on the walls. It was ideal evidence and a sign that the enemy was so arrogant that they didn't care they were leaving tracks behind.

After spinning furiously through the likely outcomes, Li Hao decided to aggravate the situation.

Yuan Shuo asked a few questions on the other side of the communicator, confirming that his student really wanted to do this. The smart young man wouldn't take action without cause or reason. In that case, he would offer some support for a minor matter.

"Very well, I will call the Inspectorate immediately! Zhang Yuan was a Veteris student—if this really was a murder, the Institute will not idly sit by. Retreat for now, people from the Institute and Inspectorate will be there within the hour."

"Thank you, teacher!" Li Hao quickly offered thanks. His teacher was very dependable at times, which made him even more reluctant to talk about the scarlet shadow.

As much authority as he commanded, Yuan Shuo was just an ordinary person. Li Hao didn't want to drag the esteemed professor into things.

"No need for thanks!" Yuan Shuo dismissed and exchanged a few more words before hanging up.

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*The Veteris Institute of Silver City.*

Deep within the Institute, in a large residence built with classic flair, an alert Yuan Shuo looked around in full spirits. Hale and hearty, he seemed more like a soldier than one of the city's most notable professors.

A stack of files sat in front of him—six self-immolation cases!

“The Inspectorate... is a sieve!” Cursing lowly, he rubbed his temples after he hung up. The organization was becoming ever more inept over the years. Their files were leaked so easily! Anyone in Silver City who wished to keep an eye on this matter could get their hands on a copy.

“There's never a dull moment with my student... It's one thing to investigate this in secret, but he dared to report it to his superiors? It's obvious that none of these cases are normal!”

The old man sighed softly. *You're too inexperienced, youngster. Don't you know that the Inspectorate is riddled with holes? Anyone with their wits about them can identify the problems with these files!*

“Sword of the Lis, blade of the Zhangs, fists of the Zhaos, footwork of the Lius...” Yuan Shuo hummed the folk song as he quickly digested the contents of the files. Did it have to do with his student?

“I wonder if the six dead are related to this song.” He knew it since he was an old resident of Silver City. Being a renowned scholar, it was the first thing he thought of when he saw the files. This particular collection of surnames immediately jumped out.

After a while of contemplation, Yuan Shuo picked up his communicator and swiftly dialed a number.

“I am Yuan Shuo!” He barked in a dignified voice tinged with anger when the call finally connected. “Cut the blather, my student is in danger! The Veteris self-immolation case from last year is possibly a murder. Doesn't the Inspectorate have any knowledge about this?!”

“.....”

“I don’t care about that! Li Hao is my student and studied by my side as soon as he entered the Institute. Do you know why that is? He is a genius, a premier explorer! He will plumb the depths of ancient civilizations in the future, but had to withdraw from school because of your ineptitude! Do you know the damages you’ve inflicted on the Institute?!”

“.....”

“So now Li Hao’s found something, but you guys are a massive sieve and immediately exposed him! He’s in danger right now and might die at any time! I don’t care what you do, you will rescue him from his fellow student Zhang Yuan’s house even if you have to level the street! Capture anyone and anything lurking in the shadows!”

“.....”

“Shut up and send your people now! I don’t care how much of a disturbance you cause, you will surround that street and slowly advance on the house. Encircle all killers in hiding. My only demand is that Li Hao returns safe and sound!”

“.....”

“That’s it! If you can’t do it, I’ll go to the Night Watchers right now! Do you think I’m blind, that I can’t see the issues with these six cases?! You guys don’t want the Night Watchers to interfere, but if my student dies, I’ll take this straight to the top and rip the hair off every last one of you!”

“Please quell your anger, Elder Yuan. We’ll get on this right away, don’t worry!” The inspector general’s temples throbbed on the other side of the communicator. Although the old guy didn’t wield any real authority, his network spanned far and wide. He’d taught at the Institute for nearly fifty years and many of his former students were now people of note.

The Inspectorate would buckle under the pressure if this matter grew out of proportion.

“Don’t worry my ass! The Institute will be sending people as well! I’ll go myself if it comes down to it! I’d like to see who dares kill Veteris students right in Silver City! One wasn’t enough, now they’re going after my final disciple! They’ve eaten the heart of a bear and the courage of a panther!” Yuan Shuo roared like a lion. Since Li Hao wanted to compound the situation to lure certain parties out of hiding... he would blow everything up!

The professor never shied away from causing greater trouble. That was someone else’s problem, not his!

A variety of parties and interests needed him, so they wouldn’t do anything to him. Li Hao was easy to take care of too—he’ll just make the little guy his assistant. Those who didn’t dare touch Yuan Shuo wouldn’t dare touch his assistant either.

Yuan Shuo lost his anger as soon as he hung up. He looked outside with a soft sigh. *Kid, mundane people shouldn’t get involved in this. Even if there’s a problem with Zhang Yuan’s death, you’ve done enough. You should stay out of it now.*

“What a pity!” the professor exhaled an almost inaudible murmur.

*What a pity that I can’t induct the mysteries into myself. Things wouldn’t be such a hassle otherwise. If I could access mysterious power, my aptitude in the New Book of Five Styles would catapult me forward. All manner of riffraff would give way then!*

“Hmph!” the old man snorted. *The Night Watchers might not actually want me to access the mysteries. Would I still work with them if I did? All these years of saying they’ll find a way, but they still have no answers. Do they take me for a fool?*

“Li Hao... the sword of the Lis?” Yuan Shuo closed his eyes and put it out of his mind. *Kid, you should return to the Institute and be my assistant. I’m getting up there in age, I do need a successor.*