

STAR GATE

----- Chapter 2: Scarlet Shadow

Opportunities are to be created. Li Hao couldn't sit around waiting and hoping for one. He quickly sorted through the file in front of him and headed for the office in his area.

Knock knock knock sounded as he rapped on the door.

"Come in!" called out the department head.

Li Hao pushed the door open. "Good morning, sir!"

"Hey there, Li Hao!" Middle-aged Wang Jie smiled to see his visitor. Here was a good lad who was polite and willing to put in hard work! Although he'd prematurely ended his studies at Silver City's finest institute, it wasn't like the boy had been expelled. He'd voluntarily withdrawn, so Wang Jie still paid quite some attention to Li Hao.

"Sir, I have a report to make." Li Hao flashed an answering grin.

"Have a seat," Wang Jie offered.

The Department of Classified Affairs labored under a light workload and none of their matters were critical. The most important issues were assigned to the law enforcement team, which left the department rather quiet.

Is the lad trying to build a closer relationship so I'll promote him? But it'd only been half a year since Li Hao withdrew from school and started full-time. It was impossible to put his name forward in such a short period.

As Wang Jie's mind traveled down various possibilities, Li Hao turned serious and began his report in a low voice.

"Sir, my duties at the Department of Classified Affairs entail cataloging disputed and unsettled cases. It's been roughly a year since I joined the

department and I've reorganized and recategorized some of the files within the last ten years..."

"I'm aware, and as expected of a Veteris student!" Wang Jie nodded with a smile. "The filing situation was less than optimal before and worms had nearly gotten to some of the older cases. I sent someone to clean them up, but it was still tough to find what we needed. We can quickly find whatever we want after you've come, so credit goes where credit's due!"

Li Hao hastily shook his head. "Sir, I'm not here to brag about my accomplishments."

What, really?

Wang Jie chuckled despite himself. Did the lad really have something to report? He nodded and motioned for Li Hao to continue.

Li Hao took out a sheaf of papers and handed a set to his department head. He paged through his copy and spoke in a levelheaded voice that belied his years.

"September 16, 1720 records a self-immolation case at the Quiet Residences of Silver City. Eyewitnesses report sparks suddenly igniting in the person of interest before he burned to death."

Wang Jie scanned the case in his hand and looked back at the young man. A closed case from ten years ago, and an accident at that. What did the lad mean by bringing it up again?

"September 22, 1723. The hair of a sales clerk at the Commerce and Trade Center spontaneously ignites. It quickly spreads to the rest of her body and burns the sales clerk to death."

"I know this one." Wang Jie nodded. "I wrote the file. I visited the scene and confirmed that it was an accident due to static electricity in the center."

Li Hao didn't refute the explanation and continued, "August 18, 1725. A guest checks into the People's Hotel and is discovered one day later, dead from setting himself on fire."

Five years since the first self-immolation case, two years from the second. It amounted to three self-immolation cases within five years, but all were accidents. Numerous cases were reported in Silver City everyday, so three such cases in five years wasn't a big deal. No one paid attention to them.

They might have caught some attention if the same inspector handled all three, but only just.

Too many cases passed through the Department of Classified Affairs and Wang Jie normally didn't pay them any heed. Frowning, he turned to Li Hao as faint premonition prickled at him.

"February 16, 1727. Another person dies of self-immolation on East Main Street in Silver City. The culprit is ball lightning appearing nearby that causes flames to erupt in the person of interest. That marks one and a half years from the previous case!"

Wang Jie's face tightened with alarm. Three years to two, two years to one and a half!

"August 12, 1728. The Inspectorate branch of the Silver City suburbs reports a missing person. Their charred remains are later discovered by a river, seemingly the result of a lightning strike from a thunderstorm. It is treated as an accident."

Another year and a half!

When subordinate agencies reported cases, the Inspectorate simply archived them for record-keeping purposes and didn't get involved. Not to mention, it'd been an accident that the suburb division already closed the books on, so there was no need for headquarters to overrule things without reason.

Wang Jie's expression grew dark, he really hadn't paid attention to these cases. There were too many that passed through his department and a fair number of old ones were destroyed every year.

"One and a half years..." He looked at Li Hao instead of paging through the files in his hands. "The first interval was three years, the second was two years, and now we have two cases spaced one and a half years apart. Did another self-immolation case happen in August or September of 1729?"

1729 was last year. Wang Jie wracked his brains—*had* something happened then? If so, that made for an interval of one year and meant six cases took place in Silver City within ten years!

It didn't seem much when averaged out—two years per case. Silver City was enormous and more than one Inspectorate branch was in charge of it. One branch might come across one case in ten years, so who would pay it any attention?

Li Hao nodded. "Another case took place in 1729 at the Veteris Institute. The person of interest was my classmate from the dorm room next door. It's part of the reason why I withdrew from the Institute.

"I personally witnessed everything and became extremely afraid. I dreaded the thought of staying in school. The circumstances around my classmate's death were very strange, so I want to investigate why these people went up in flames!

"This is partially why I insisted on joining the Inspectorate. Outsiders cannot access these files, but I can! I perused and organized all of the self-immolation cases from the last ten years and feel that they may not be accidents!"

Wang Jie quickly flipped through the papers in his hands, briefly scanning them before looking back at Li Hao. "Tell me what you're thinking."

“There have been six cases in ten years. No, strictly speaking it’s nine years, since we haven’t received a report so far this year,” Li Hao responded solemnly. “Sir, I care a lot about this because of my classmate’s involvement. It’s almost July, which means it’s been almost a year since the last one! The intervals have been growing shorter, so if these self-immolation cases aren’t a coincidence, we might see another one in the near future.”

“Not an accident?” Wang Jie paged through the files again. He was a veteran inspector and had been reassigned to the Department of Classified Affairs on account of his advancing age. If it wasn’t for Li Hao sorting through the files and grouping some cases together, they might’ve continued to fly under the radar.

And now, anyone would feel a hint of unease when all six self-immolation cases were viewed together through the same lens.

“We cannot determine from present circumstances that these cases are premeditated,” Wang Jie exhaled, then continued sharply. “But... too many coincidences mean that they are anything but! I will discuss this with the other departments, especially the enforcement team. The Department of Classified Affairs does not directly become involved in cases, but some attention does need to be brought to bear on these recurring self-immolation incidents.

“If it happens again soon...” The department head’s expression shifted. “That means your deduction is correct and they’re not simple accidents!”

His stern expression relaxed as he looked at the young man and he smiled.

“Of course, there’s no need to be overly worked up. Even if they are murders, there are cases a thousand times more awful than these. But you, Li Hao, did a very good job!”

Wang Jie's seriousness did not hold out for long. Even if they did confirm these incidents as murders, it wasn't a big deal. Having seen and heard so much throughout his career, six people dead in ten years really wasn't much.

He was more gratified by Li Hao's persistence and sense of responsibility. He'd also gained a better understanding of the young man's withdrawal from school.

Classmate?

More like a good friend!

There was no need for Li Hao to withdraw otherwise.

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Li Hao didn't continue to press the point.

Murder?

Would he need to flee from the Veteris Institute if it was simply murder?

Having witnessed everything with his own eyes, he would much rather that it was just murder. *What was that shadow the color of blood?*

Self-immolation?

No, a scarlet shadow had burned his neighbor to death, but none of the other classmates who'd witnessed the incident mentioned seeing the shadow!

Had they lied?

No, there was no need for that.

Li Hao knew for certain that he was the only witness. The others hadn't discovered the scarlet shadow, or perhaps they couldn't see it at all. And he'd felt it again recently, he'd even vaguely sensed it last night!

Perhaps there was more than one of it!

Once the Inspectorate takes a look at the files and realizes they're no accidents, they'll report it to the Night Watchers if they can't handle it.

Cases that no one paid further attention to were concluded as accidents and their files delivered to the Department of Classified Affairs to gather dust. But the Inspectorate saw matters through to the end if they ever decided to look into a matter.

The Night Watchers! Li Hao recited to himself as Wang Jie stood up.

"Then I'm going to call for a meeting with the enforcement team, I might need you later on, Li Hao. You're the one who organized these files, after all."

The young man quickly bobbed his head up and down as he heaved an inward sigh of relief. Good, this was what he wanted to hear.

He did all this so he could participate, but not directly. That was too high profile. He wanted to take part only as the discoverer of the connection between these cases. That way, he would very possibly come in contact with the Night Watchers if the mysterious group became involved.

But coming in contact didn't mean that he could join them, and he may not dare join them even if given the chance!

Li Hao had read too many case files over the past year. Some of them held additional meaning between the lines. Take the scarlet shadow, for example. He didn't seem to be the only one who could see it. Some other records also spoke of it, but their authors were either dead or gone missing.

There were no exceptions.

Thus, he didn't dare speak of the matter as there was great danger lurking within. He didn't dare tell anyone that he could see the scarlet shadow. Who knew if even the Night Watchers were a fully reliable group?

No matter what, I need to get closer to them through regular means! Li Hao took a deep breath and backed out of the office. He needed to make their

acquaintance not only to investigate the truth, but also to ensure he remained well and alive.

Everyone who could see the scarlet shadow was dead. He didn't know if there were more who could, but anyone who revealed that they could was dead. This was very abnormal.

"I can't just die like this. I didn't leave the Veteris Institute to hide in the Inspectorate." Li Hao breathed out softly and grinned brilliantly.

The ideal outcome was for the Night Watchers to take care of this matter and for some unexpected benefits to fall into his lap, such as a transfer. As a paper pusher, it would be nice to be a paper pusher for the Night Watchers if they would have him.

He didn't think he was a good fit for the field duty teams—they were very dangerous. He'd asked obliquely when eating dinner at his teacher's and learned that the casualty rate for the Night Watchers was very high!

"Let's just take things one step at a time." Li Hao smiled to see Wang Jie rush off. The first move was in play.

Scarlet shadow... What the heck is it and why can I see it?

etvolare's Thoughts

Some thanks are in order!

Definitely huge thanks to RWX for providing this space for me! When he first mentioned the idea of translating some of these big names, you bet I jumped on it like a young master robbing the MC! Eagle Eats Chick is the biggest name I've ever translated, and that's with one of my works in Barnes and Noble. I'm incredibly honored and delighted to have this chance to work on one of Qidian's platinum authors. This is gonna be fun.