

STAR GATE

Chapter 3: Sword of the Lis (I)

After leaving the department head's office, Li Hao glanced at the calendar on his table when he returned to his seat.

July 12, 1730.

"Almost a year!" he mumbled.

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

"It's been almost a year since I joined the Inspectorate," the young man explained with a smile.

"Oh, you still remember that?" Chen Na responded indifferently. What was the point of recalling when one joined the Inspectorate?

Li Hao didn't say anything. He remembered! He remembered it very clearly!

He joined the Inspectorate on August 1, 1729. His withdrawal from school was July 23, the day after the incident. It wasn't long after that that he applied to Silver City's law enforcement agency.

A self-immolation incident occurred in the Veteris Institute on July 22, 1729. Second year student Zhang Yuan went up in flames outside his dorm room and died from his injuries.

After the Inspectorate looked into the case, a media blackout was imposed to protect the school's reputation upon confirmation that it was indeed an accident. Very few knew that a Veteris student had died on school grounds.

Neither did the matter snowball because Zhang Yuan's parents were dead and he didn't really have relatives. No one came around looking for him, so the matter was quickly suppressed.

Li Hao's mentor eventually guessed that his withdrawal was related to Zhang Yuan since the two were close.

Zhang Yuan!

It'd been almost a year since Little Yuan's death. Events of the day still came readily to Li Hao, even now.

Zhang Yuan had been caught in the grip of a scarlet shadow. As his body slowly burned away, no one realized how Zhang Yuan's soul struggled, his mind wailed, and his heart despaired.

But Li Hao saw his friend clearly. He moved forward to help, but Little Yuan's mouth repeatedly opened and closed when he saw Li Hao. Although he couldn't make a sound despite the incredible anguish, his mouth kept moving. Others might think he was screaming or moaning; only Li Hao knew differently.

"Run!"

His friend wanted him to run.

Li Hao knew Zhang Yuan too well. He didn't want Li Hao to get closer, he wanted Li Hao to run for his life!

Zhang Yuan had comically been wearing only a pair of boxers when he died outside his dorm room. It was far from funny to Li Hao. His friend must have already gone to bed, but when the incident occurred, he pushed through the throes of extreme agony to stagger into the hallway. He'd turned in the direction of Li Hao's room!

Unable to make a sound, he gathered all of his mental resolve to break a porcelain tile. That raised a disturbance in the dead of night, causing many students to poke their heads out of their rooms—including Li Hao.

Had Zhang Yuan been crying out for help?

That's what everyone thought, but Li Hao didn't think so. His friend had been warning him. He floundered out of his room, made a noise to lure Li Hao out of his, then wordlessly mouthed "run" at the end of it all.

He hadn't been begging Li Hao for help, but warning him to flee for survival.

"Fourteen years," Li Hao murmured to himself.

He and Zhang Yuan had known each other for fourteen years, not the two as fellow students that everyone was aware of. They were classmates since young, or was it more accurate to describe them as best friends?

Both were quiet characters of few words as the brotherhood of men didn't need to be mentioned all the time. It was more than amply demonstrated by Zhang Yuan's formidable determination to deliver a message to Li Hao in the face of impending death!

Zhang Yuan's case was ultimately kept under wraps and disappeared without a ripple. Li Hao was likely his only close friend, so no one else looked into his death.

Why did Little Yuan want me to run? Did he see something? Hear something? Was he just afraid? Or did he know that the scarlet shadow would come for me next? These questions had plagued Li Hao's mind for the past year. He couldn't begin to imagine how much torment Zhang Yuan had suffered, yet his friend chose to spend his last moments warning Li Hao. There was definitely more than met the eye here, perhaps the scarlet shadow was coming for him next!

“Six people plus me makes seven. What’s the commonality between us? The cases are spread out over ten years and occurring at a faster pace. If I’m included among the persons of interest, there’s no connection between us other than me and Zhang Yuan. Are these random killings or targeted murders?”

Li Hao rubbed his forehead and flipped through the files in front of him. They were of the other six people as well as some clues collected over the past year through various channels.

It’d been ten years since the first person’s death. Perhaps there were more before them, perhaps not. Li Hao had no way of knowing. Ten years was too long an interval, it was hard to investigate anything before that.

“Gender? Age? Profession? Background? Mutual acquaintances?” He’d paged through the files in front of him multiple times, but none of the usual shared attributes jumped out. It was a collection of strangers unrelated to each other.

“Why did the scarlet shadow kill them? Did they threaten it somehow, or was there another motive at stake?” Endless confusion swirled in Li Hao’s mind. Of course, there was another reason why he doggedly continued the investigation—revenge!

No one cared about Zhang Yuan’s death, but he did. There were also too many uncertainties associated with the Night Watchers. If it wasn’t for the fact that he couldn’t find more useful information on his own, or that he lacked good ideas on how to handle a shadow that no one could see, he wouldn’t place any hope in the mysterious group. He would rather take out the culprit himself!

“Reviewing their information again, Li Hao?” Chen Na couldn’t help but ask when she saw the young man reach for the familiar bundle of documents.

She'd seen him study these cases numerous times throughout the year. They were growing thicker, and Li Hao had read through them so many times that the files were getting worn.

However, he slammed them shut whenever she wanted a look. She could only vaguely tell that they were the personal files of a few people.

Li Hao raised his head and flashed her a smile of purity. "Just having a look, big sis Na."

"Pfft!" Chen Na snorted. *Just having a look? For an entire year?*

The kid wasn't too honest at times.

"You've had a look for so long, Li Hao, what are you looking for? There's so many veteran inspectors around, but you go at it alone instead of asking them. What can a rookie like you find? Why don't I take a look, maybe I will come up with something? Don't worry, I won't tell anyone," Chen Na giggled.

"How about it, let me have a look?"

She was very curious!

Li Hao was unwilling to let others know about his investigation because he worried about raising the scarlet shadow's attention. But he'd continuously come up empty-handed, and since Wang Jie had his report, it didn't matter if Chen Na took a look as well.

He hemmed and hawed for a bit before saying, "Then... sure, but let's not bother anyone else with this." He didn't want too many to know that he was paying attention to these cases.

Chen Na was also a rookie and thus relatively less perceptive and shrewd. Anyone else might think of the associated cases when they read the personal files and know that Li Hao was looking into the self-immolation incidents.

He was letting Chen Na take a look because he'd stared at them for so long and had nothing to show for it. Maybe he was missing the forest for the trees or was bogged down in the weeds.

Or maybe there really was no connection to be found.

Perhaps an outsider like Chen Na could identify something?

Very well.

Li Hao wasn't holding out any hope, he was just unwilling to accept no progress after so much time and effort.

"Don't worry!" Chen Na grinned from ear to ear. She finally had a chance to peek into Li Hao's little secret!

Worried that he'd change his mind, she leaned over the tables and quickly grabbed the files from his hand. After rapidly flipping through them, she asked, "Li Hao, what are you trying to find in these documents? There's so much here—you've recorded so many details that they're basically memoirs. What are you trying to do?"

"Commonalities!" Li Hao answered after brief thought. "I want to know what they have in common!"

Chen Na blinked, at a loss. She took a closer look at the six people—different ages, professions, backgrounds, gender, and social circles. The first of them had died ten years ago, and the latest was last year. What were they supposed to have in common?

Li Hao's been reading these for a year? He's... got a lot of time on his hands. But the last file gave her an inkling of a clue—Zhang Yuan, a student at the Veteris Institute. He was the primary reason why Li Hao scrutinized these files, wasn't he?

Zhang Yuan, deceased on July 22, 1729. Li Hao withdrew from school not long after that, right? Or did he withdraw from school at the same time?

Chen Na took another look and seemed to understand more of the context when she factored in Li Hao's withdrawal from the Veteris Institute. Some of their colleagues still failed to understand why a Veteris student would forsake his studies and throw away a glorious future. Perhaps she grasped some of the underlying reasons after the young man shared the files with her today.

Previously regarding the issue with amusement, her eyes sharpened with solemnity when her thoughts traveled here. Did Li Hao suspect that Zhang Yuan's death was a murder instead of an accident?

Were all six actually a series of murders?

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Li Hao waited for a bit while Chen Na perused the files, but didn't mind that he didn't receive an immediate response. Instead, he turned his mind to his next step.

The Inspectorate should be opening an investigation after he made his report, but he didn't hold out much hope for that line of action. Not unless the Night Watchers swiftly involved themselves!

The key thing is that the scarlet shadow might attack me soon if I'm the next target. I think I saw a hazy red thing a few days ago—was it the scarlet shadow? Is it looking for me? Or has it already found me and not taken action yet because of my identity?

The Inspectorate was the city's law enforcement agency, after all. A student's death might not raise too much attention, even if the student was from the vaunted Veteris Institute. But the death of a third rank inspector would draw a detailed inspection. The death of one of their own was far more severe than a student's.

Based on what I know, there's a time limit to each appearance. The shadow never manifests for too long, or it might be more accurate to say that it only appears at certain times. There is one commonality between the victims, but... it's not a very clear link!

Li Hao wasn't entirely clueless after one year. At the very least, he'd determined that the weather was never ideal on the days that the six died. There was always either a thunderstorm, ball lightning, or clouds... No one paid attention to the weather when the incidents took place; Li Hao had been forced to take note of it when he couldn't locate any other clues.

He keenly recalled that it'd been drizzling the night Zhang Yuan died.

The shadow comes out only when it rains, or when the weather is bad. Li Hao swiftly scribbled something on a piece of paper and ripped it up just as quickly. He put down his pen after shredding his notes and sank into deep thought.

While he rummaged through his thoughts, Chen Na suddenly gasped, "I've got it!"