

STAR GATE

Chapter 4: Sword of the Lis (II)

Li Hao started and jerked his head up. *Got it?*

Got what?

How is that possible??

He hadn't expected anything and Chen Na had only briefly glanced through the files. *She's pulling a fast one on me, isn't she?* He frowned, then quickly relaxed his brows and returned to his customary smile.

"What did you find, big sis Na?"

Chen Na felt a bit awkward as she'd caught the tail end of Li Hao's frown. *That's right, he really cares about this. It's not a joke.*

"Well... I'm not done looking through everything yet, there's too much," she said haltingly.

Li Hao remained unruffled. *As I thought.* There was nothing to be disappointed about since he hadn't hoped for anything in the first place.

Chen Na, however, continued, "I'm not done yet, but I think there really is a connection. I'm just... not entirely sure." She raised a piece of paper. "I doodle, so I wrote down their names as I looked through their files."

Li Hao glanced at the paper and nodded. The six persons of interest! He knew their names by heart, what of it?

None of them shared the same name or surname. Some were three characters, others were two. There was no connection when it came to their names.

“Zhou Qing, Hong Jiao, Wang Haoming, Liu Yunsheng, Zhao Shihao, and Zhang Yuan. Those are their names, right?” Chen Na quickly asked since she held Li Hao’s attention.

The young man inclined his head.

She scanned the list of names again and suddenly doubted herself. What if Li Hao thought she was playing him? That would be bad. She coughed after an awkward silence. “Forget it, pretend I didn’t say anything. It doesn’t seem right, we’re missing two.”

“What?” Li Hao twitched with surprise. “Missing two?”

“It would be right if there’s a Zheng surnamed victim and a Li surnamed victim,” Chen Na answered even more stiltedly. “But there isn’t, so um... just ignore that I said anything.”

She didn’t want to go on, this was so embarrassing!

Waves of emotion rocked Li Hao. Why should there be two more? A Li surnamed victim... His surname was Li!

As for a Zheng surname... Li Hao could only access cases within the last ten years. Any undisputed cases over ten years old were destroyed. There were too many files at the Inspectorate and too many cases that were accidents. The Department of Classified Affairs didn’t keep all of them archived.

Despite the shock roiling through his heart, Li Hao maintained a cool composure and stretched his lips in a smile. “C’mon, big sis Na, out with it. We’re just chatting. Why should there be two more surnames?”

“You’re not from Silver City, are you?” Chen Na looked at him curiously.

“That’s right.”

“Hmm...” Chen Na nodded as she thought of something else. “I got it. You... don’t have elders at home, do you?”

“My grandparents passed away a long time ago.” Li Hao grew curious. What did this have to do with the elderly?

“If you have older relatives at home, sometimes they speak of local sayings and folktales. I remember my grandma loved talking about this when I was young.” Chen Na didn’t feel as awkward anymore since Li Hao was genuinely interested. She traveled back in time for a moment. “I used to live with my grandma and she loved singing folk songs. There was one that went like this...”

She struck her grandma’s customary pose and cleared her throat, singing softly, “The sword of the Lis, blade of the Zhangs, fists of the Zhaos, footwork of the Lius... and the trouble that is the Zheng young master!”

Embarrassment crept in after a short verse and she smiled bashfully. “It doesn’t sound as good in the standard language. It sounded really nice when my grandma sang it in the Silver City dialect. It’s part of the local operas and probably sounds juvenile to someone who hasn’t heard it before.”

A keen light danced in Li Hao’s eyes. Folk songs! Sword of the Lis, blade of the Zhangs... There were eight surnames in this song!

Li, Zhang, Zhao, Liu, Wang, Hong, Zhou, Zheng!

Li Hao yanked the paper out of Chen Na’s hand and looked at the first name—Zhou Qing. He was the first self-immolation incident from ten years ago, followed by sales clerk Hong Jiao, then Wang Haoming...

If the first to die was someone surnamed Zheng, that would make Zhou Qing the second victim, Hong Jiao third, and Wang Haoming fourth...

And if he reversed the order of the eight surnames in the Silver City folk song, it would perfectly match the order of the incidents. The last to die was Zhang Yuan. He was a match for the blade of the Zhangs.

That meant there was one more to come! Someone else would die, someone surnamed Li. They were the first in the song and they matched the sword of the Lis!

Li Hao's expression shifted drastically and he jerked his head up at Chen Na, unable to conceal the surprise and agitation rippling through him. "This song... when did it start circulating, who wrote it, w-what..." His voice was a little hoarse.

Startled, Chen Na jumped from the intensity in his eyes. "Calm down, Li Hao. Many elders know the song, but not that many young folks do. That's why you don't know it. We can look into things slowly if it catches your eye, don't be in a rush!"

Li Hao took a deep breath and suppressed the impulses raging in his heart. He couldn't rush into things! Who would've thought that Chen Na would give him such an important clue with just a quick glance? He'd never heard of this song before and never heard anyone sing it. It must've fallen out of fashion years ago.

As the official language proliferated and became standard, the older generation slowly took folk songs to the grave with them. Li Hao's grandfather passed away a long time ago—Li Hao had never even met the man, so there was naturally no one to sing the song to him.

Calm down! He told himself sternly. What was the point of rushing? The key thing was that there was a clue now. There was no need to be in a hurry.

I need to confirm if the first to die was surnamed Zheng.

While the Department of Classified Affairs destroyed files more than ten years old, there were still places he could look into. He just needed to find out if there were any Zheng surnamed casualties of self-immolation within the last fifteen years.

Li Hao was both excited and incredibly fearful. If he really did find such a person, that meant he was next!

Little Yuan must have seen or heard something to compel him to warn Li Hao.

The sword of the Lis...

The sword of the Lis!

Li Hao's eyes shot wide open. There was a sword in his family! It was all coming to him now. His family did have a sword... of sorts?

But... what he was thinking of didn't really seem like a sword. At the same time, however, he knew it was a sword.

It was very contradictory and the truth.

When he was a young boy, Li Hao's father pulled a sword-shaped jade pendant over the boy's head and said solemnly, "This is a sword called Stellaris and it is the only inheritance of our family. Do not say it is jade when you pass it onto your children. It is a sword."

His father had been very solemn, then relaxed helplessly when he saw how lost Li Hao looked. "Your grandfather said the same thing to me when he gave it to me, and these words come from our ancestors. They insist that it is a sword, so just call it that."

That was why Li Hao immediately thought that the Lis really did have a sword—it was called Stellaris. In fact, the sword-shaped jade pendant was around his neck right now!

Confusion was setting in. If the sword of the Lis in the folk song was the pendant, then yes, the Lis possessed a sword.

Do the Zhangs have a blade?

He didn't know if the others corresponded to what the song described, but Li Hao knew Zhang Yuan well because his friend's parents died early on.

Blade of the Zhangs...

Li Hao combed through his memories. Did the Zhangs have a blade or not? Snippets flew past his mind's eye and he stilled. *Wait, the Zhangs might really have a blade.*

It was different from his pendant as jade was valuable, more or less, especially a piece of old jade. Therefore, the Lis treated it with some importance.

But the blade of the Zhangs... Li Hao suddenly recalled that a young Zhang Yuan once snuck something out for the two of them to play with. Zhang Yuan's father quickly found out and gave him a thorough beating. That item seemed to have been a blade shaped rock!

Li Hao's memories were a bit hazy, but he recalled amid the angry lecture delivered that the item was passed down from the Zhang ancestors. Although it wasn't worth anything, it was still a family heirloom that should not be toyed with.

But after that, Li Hao saw his friend's father casually throw the stone off to the side. Thus, his personal theory was that Zhang Yuan's father had just wanted to smack his son that day and seized any excuse to do so.

Is that rock the blade of the Zhangs in the folk song?

If it was, then everything matched!

Li Hao never saw the stone again, but that was also because the two grew up and had better things to do than play with a particular stone. There were plenty by the side of the road if they wanted one.

This is it! Everything... everything in the folk song is most likely real! He subconsciously touched his chest. The jade pendant was cool to the touch and didn't exhibit anything different.

The hint of cool snapped Li Hao back to his senses and he looked at Chen Na with yearning.

“Big sis Na, may I meet your grandma?”

Where did the folk song come from, who first sang it, how long had it been around, and was it complete? Why was it related to the self-immolation cases? What was the scarlet shadow and why was it killing people from the eight families in the song?

Was it killing just one representative, or was it killing everyone related to the eight families? If that was the case...

“Huh?” Li Hao blinked before Chen Na could respond and grabbed the stack of files. He flipped swiftly through the pages, despite having read them endless times. “Hong Jiao’s parents are dead and she was young when she died, so there is no one left of the Hong.”

“Zhou Qing is survived by his wife, but they have no children after many years of marriage,” he mumbled to himself. “Zhang Yuan goes without saying...”

His friend was the only remaining descendant of the Zhangs after his parents passed away when he was young.

“Wang Haoming was unmarried when he died, but he wasn’t an only child. He has a younger brother...”

“Liu Yunsheng was an old man and a bachelor his entire life.

“Zhao Shihao had a daughter who left Silver City with his wife after his death. Their whereabouts are unknown.”

Li Hao rapidly turned the pages, seeing that some were married and some had kids. Since their marital statuses were different, that attribute hadn’t jumped out to him before.

His thoughts suddenly turned to himself.

My parents passed away three years ago in an accident—an absolute accident as the car flipped over after it lost control. But looking at this... was it really an accident?

Li Hao's parents passed away three years ago in an accident unrelated to self-immolation. That was why he didn't think to include his parents in these cases, but a myriad of possibilities surged through his mind now.

The Zhang, Hong, Zhou, and Liu bloodlines were ended. There were no further direct descendants. Wang Haoming had a younger brother and Liu Shihao had a daughter. If he was the Li of the song, then the Lis... had only him.

This isn't meant to just kill one person, but to eradicate the entire clan!

Li Hao's heart pounded with fear, but also fury!

Did my parents not die from an accident?!

He couldn't confirm his speculation, however, since there were still living members of the Wangs and Zhaos.

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"Li Hao!" Chen Na's shout brought him back to reality. "Are you alright?"

The young man had answered his own question and then ignored everything she said, like he was lost in thought.

"I'm fine!" Li Hao quickly shook his head.

"Do... do you think these people have something to do with the families in the folk song?" Chen Na glanced at him. "But it's just a folk song. Some of these songs are modified from mythology, whereas others are just random ditties hummed everyday. I think it's just a coincidence. We're missing two surnames from the list, yeah?"

She wanted to smile at the young man, but suddenly paused and looked at Li Hao. Missing two... a Zheng surname and a Li surname!

Li Hao?

Did all this have something to do with Li Hao?

She was an inspector after all, so basic logic and rationality operated readily. She immediately connected the dots to Li Hao. Did he investigate this so doggedly because it related to him?

“Li Hao, your surname is Li, right?”

The young man chuckled ruefully. What, was he supposed to say no?

“Tell me the truth, is there something off about their deaths?” Chen Na frowned and looked at the files again. A cursory glance indicated that they were all accidents and spread throughout multiple years. Was there supposed to be a connection between them?

“Let’s talk about that later, big sis Na. Can I meet your grandma?” Li Hao didn’t want to dwell on the topic.