

STAR GATE

- Chapter 5: The Fog Clears

Chen Na also dropped the topic and followed Li Hao's change in thought. "I told you just now, but you didn't hear. My grandma passed away a few years ago..."

"I'm sorry!"

"No worries, she was more than ninety years old. It was a happy passing," Chen Na waved off the apologetic young man. "A lot of people on my grandma's side know this folk song, at least, that was the case when I was young. I don't know if that still holds true or how many of my older relatives are still alive. I haven't made a trip back to the family home in quite a few years.

"How about this," she continued, given how vested Li Hao was in the matter. "If you really are that interested, we can visit and conduct an actual inquiry. We might be able to learn something if we run into an elder who knows the song."

Li Hao gave it some thought and nodded.

"We're off the day after tomorrow, does that work for you, big sis Na?"

"Yeah!"

Li Hao's mind was at ease after they decided on a course of action.

"Big sis," he spoke rapidly, "You know more people at the Inspectorate than I do, can you do me a favor?"

"Let's hear it."

“Can you look into a few people for me?” Li Hao was a lot more forthcoming with his neighbor now that he’d shown Chen Na the files. “Wang Haoming’s younger brother doesn’t live in Silver City. His only relative here was his older brother, and he hasn’t been back since Wang Haoming died.

“The second is Zhao Shihao’s daughter! She and his wife left the city after his death and haven’t been heard from since.”

The Silver City Inspectorate exercised jurisdiction only over Silver City. It held no authority in other regions, much less the right to pull their citizen’s files. He was asking Chen Na because her network was bigger than his.

Li Hao wasn’t even familiar with the branch on the city’s outskirts, but there would always be someone else’s colleague, old classmate, or friend assigned there. He might find something if he sent out feelers.

Chen Na’s eyes darted around. *He wants me to look into some of these people’s families? What does Li Hao mean by this?*

“Can you do it, big sis Na?”

“It’s easy enough if we have a general range.” Chen Na nodded after thinking it over. “The worst would be if we don’t have a single clue. It’s a big world out there beyond our Silver City and we don’t have the authority to cross jurisdictional boundaries. Nor are we authorized to access the databases. If we want to entrust someone with this task, it would be much better if we have a designated target.”

“I understand. I have some information and I’ll consolidate it into a report for you. I may not know precisely where they are, but I know what city they’re in.” Li Hao had a preliminary understanding of these people’s families after his year of investigation. He just wasn’t able to contact them since they weren’t in Silver City.

“Then that’s easy, leave it to me!” Chen Na accepted amid a flurry of Li Hao’s profuse thanks.

The two conversed for a while before Chen Na suddenly lowered her voice. “Li Hao, some things... Well, just look out for yourself, okay? I feel like... there might be more than meets the eye here.”

Being no fool, she’d made some educated guesses. If Li Hao really was the Li of the “sword of the Lis”, then would he meet with danger as well? The Inspectorate didn’t fear danger, it feared danger from unknown sources. After all, these cases had been deemed as accidents.

Li Hao nodded and didn’t say a word. There were a lot of things he needed to do and confirm. Delving into files more than ten years old, for one, to see if the Zhengs were dead. If circumstances permitted, he wanted to visit Zhang Yuan’s home as well. It remained unoccupied after his friend’s death—was the blade of the Zhangs still there?

How about the mace of the Hongs and spear of the Zhous? Did all of the weapons in the folk song exist? Where were they now?

Was the scarlet shadow out for the clan or the weapons?

Fists and footwork went without saying—nothing would remain after their people died. But if the weapons were family inheritances similar to how the Lis treated theirs, then there might be some clues to be gleaned.

He would be able to handle danger better once he identified the scarlet shadow’s goal and understood it more.

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Instead of heading straight to Zhang Yuan’s house or going home, Li Hao busied himself elsewhere.

Silver City Inspectorate.

The Archives.

Auntie Zhao, a middle-aged woman in charge of record keeping, brought out a pile of files from storage. She raised a cloud of dust as she swept them off and handed the yellowed papers to Li Hao.

“Little Hao, what do you want these for?” she asked with bemusement. “All Zheng surnamed declarations of death from 1715 to 1719 are here. There’s hundreds of them, and they’ve all been dead for a while...”

Li Hao smiled innocently. “Big sis Zhao, some unsettled cases at the Department of Classified Affairs might have something to do with them. I can’t go into details, but thank you so much for the trouble. I’ll take you out to lunch if we find any clues.”

“Never mind lunch. Little Hao, you’re no longer a little boy at twenty years old. My daughter is twenty-two, which makes her two years older than you...”

Resignation crept into Li Hao’s smile. “Let’s talk about this later, big sis. I’m still young.”

He scuttled out of the Archives in a slightly bedraggled fashion. The aunties of the Inspectorate were warm-hearted, enthusiastic people, but they had a habit of introducing their daughters to him.

Or nieces if not daughters, or someone else’s daughter.

It was his fault for being part of the Veteris Institute once. Although he’d withdrawn from school, that did nothing to diminish his popularity.

Li Hao began scanning the list he’d received. Several hundred weren’t that many and most were labeled with cause of death. He needed to eliminate most of them and cross-reference with materials on hand before identifying if there were any Zhengs present that he was looking for.

The most ideal would be if there was a cause of death that said self-immolation. That would be most convenient.

He'd discovered that the scarlet shadow, or whatever faction was behind it, killed members of the eight families through self-immolation. He wouldn't have been able to hone in on the previous victims if not for that.

There might be other secrets hidden behind that cause of death. Li Hao didn't know anything else for now.

"There was a self-immolation case in 1720 and another in 1723. The one I want should be a similar interval to the earlier cases, or maybe a longer one. What's most likely should be a Zheng victim dying before 1717." Li Hao speed-read through the names as he walked. If there was a Zheng deceased that fulfilled all of the criteria, that would mean all of his previous guesses were correct.

If there wasn't and the Zhengs were still alive, that didn't mean a complete failure either. A living person might provide more clues and in fact, it might be better if the Zhengs were still alive. That could mean they were somehow connected to the scarlet shadow.

"The folk song said something different about the Zheng young master, that he was trouble. Perhaps there's something different about this family?" Li Hao flipped to the next page as he mused. "Zheng Yunqi, died September 12, 1715 in a gas explosion..."

The young man's eyes sharpened. *Gas explosion?* That would leave him without a corpse, an outcome very similar to self-immolation. It was also a manner of death that wouldn't draw too much attention.

"Is it him?" murmured Li Hao. Usually more than one died in a gas explosion. If that was the case, all of the Zhengs might have died on the same day!

After perusing the list of hundreds, he felt that Zheng Yunqi was most likely to be the Zhengs of the folk song.

“Maybe... I can go take a look.” Li Hao found an address, but of course, it was unknown if the residence was still there after fifteen years. He’d suddenly found a lot more clues today thanks to Chen Na’s folk song, and he was beginning to identify the crux of the self-immolation cases.

If Zheng Yunqi was who he was looking for, then it meant Li Hao was the only one alive out of the eight surnames.

“Is it revenge? Or something else? Is the scarlet shadow someone’s pet or is it a special ability? Or is it a smokescreen?” Li Hao touched the shirt over his chest again—the jade sword lay underneath. Was this strictly a family heirloom, or did it have another purpose?

“I’m definitely next, given that all seven families are dead. How is the enemy finding me and how did they find the others? There’s nothing special about the victims, so why can the scarlet shadow lock onto us?”

A sense of impending danger loomed over him; Li Hao could sense the brewing storm. He quickly swiped through his communicator, wanting to see when the next overcast or rainy day was. Based on previous instances, that may be when the scarlet shadow appeared next.

“July 18, overcast!” Li Hao’s expression shifted. It was the 12th today and they were in for a week of good weather. The skies would turn cloudy on the 18th and stay that way for a while.

“So that means the fastest the scarlet shadow might appear is six days from now? And if it doesn’t appear then, it might appear anytime during this period of overcast and rainy days?”

Li Hao’s heart clenched painfully!

He hadn't been sure before if anyone was coming for him, if he was next. But now, he was convinced that the scarlet shadow had its sights fixed on him.

"Little Yuan wanted me to run. Does that mean he also guessed, or learned from the shadow, that I'll be the next victim? Why didn't it also kill me last time? Why has it waited for a year?"

"Maybe there are limitations to it, or maybe self-immolation can only be used once each time. So it has to kill me through self-immolation?"

Li Hao suddenly smiled as he rubbed his temples.

"This makes things so much better!"

Impending danger was far preferable to the unknown. He'd understood too little about the scarlet shadow before—its goal, origins, and target. Thus, he'd spent most of the past year in abject fear. After he sorted through the clues and fully understood that he was next, he wasn't afraid anymore.

There was only fury and hate!

A blood debt has to be paid in blood!

If the scarlet shadow really did appear in a week, he would go to the Night Watchers even if it meant exposing himself. He would tell them that he could see the shadow! It would be worth any price to kill the shadow, even if the price was his own life!

"Little Yuan... mom... dad... If you two also died to the scarlet shadow, I'll take revenge for all of you!" Li Hao tightened his fists as an uncharacteristic streak of savagery appeared on his gentle face!