

STAR GATE

- Chapter 6: Affecting the Entire Body By Pulling On One Hair (I)

6:00pm.

Business hours were over at the Inspectorate. Li Hao typically left work on time since he didn't operate on the front lines. He would already be gone if this was any other day, but today, he wasn't in a rush.

The department head's office.

"You say you want to take a look at Zhang Yuan's house?" Wang Jie rumbled with a glance at Li Hao.

"Yes."

"You two were once classmates and this case might turn out to be a murder, so it's not out of the question for you to have a gander. But... it's a bit of a hassle for someone from Classified Affairs to request at-home carry."

Indeed, Li Hao was here to apply for a firearm. He could bring a gun home only if Wang Jie approved his request. Although firearms might prove useless against the scarlet shadow, it wasn't a given that it would appear. In that case, Li Hao should be more on guard against his fellow human.

If his enemy was human, then guns would be of lethal importance.

"Sir, I don't want a firearm for home carry, but for the case!" Li Hao corrected.

Wang Jie chuckled. Bringing a gun home and requesting it for an investigation were two vastly different concepts. The kid was a Veteris Institute student alright! He'd changed the nature of his request with a single sentence.

"We are the Department of Classified Affairs, not the law enforcement team."

Wang Jie disappointed Li Hao when he shook his head.

The young man didn't know how best to handle the scarlet shadow yet because he wasn't too familiar with it. Having a gun in the meantime would immensely help with a sense of security.

"I've only just mentioned Zhang Yuan's case to the enforcement team, it hasn't been made into an official case yet. You won't be able to submit a request using that as a reason." Wang Jie thought rapidly. "How about this, the Institute is making a field study soon and we'll be sending some folks to protect their people. Why don't you join the team? That will assign you to the mission and you'll have the right to bear arms if you're part of the protection detail."

Li Hao blinked—resignation setting in. So despite all the twists and turns, that mission had still fallen into his lap? He'd already declined when Chen Na mentioned it this morning. Apparently, it was his teacher leading the team. Would he soon see familiar faces if he accepted the mission?

Wang Jie sighed when the young man stayed silent. "What is it? Are you afraid that Old Yuan will beat you up? I hear things didn't end too well between you two when you withdrew from school. A word of advice, Little Hao, you should find an opportunity to improve that relationship now that you're part of us. He was once your mentor, after all.

"Your future at the Inspectorate will be so much brighter if Old Yuan puts in a good word. But if everyone knows that he's put out with you, they'll consider whether it's worth offending the esteemed professor for the sake of a third rank inspector. That'll hold true even though his hand doesn't stretch to the Inspectorate."

Wang Jie was truly exerting great effort on Li Hao's behalf. He didn't know the particulars, just that Li Hao had had a falling out with his mentor when he withdrew from his studies. Although the notable professor couldn't affect the

young man's career, the Inspectorate would still have to show some face to the venerable personage.

"This is the best way for you to obtain a gun and it'll ease relations with your mentor. It's two birds with one stone—" Wang Jie really wanted to persuade Li Hao as he thought highly of the lad.

He was a few sentences in when the young man nodded, "Alright!" Wang Jie nearly choked on the rest of his words. Didn't they all say that the lad was kind hearted, but a bit too unyielding? How had he agreed so readily?

"Sir, what the stories say may not be true." Li Hao stretched his lips in an honest, but resigned smile. "My relationship with my teacher isn't like that. True, he wasn't too happy when I withdrew, but he's long set it aside and it's been over a year. He even encouraged me the other day that I need to do well at the Inspectorate."

"Is that so? Good, very good!" Wang Jie nodded with immense satisfaction. Who knew if this was the truth or not? But given how aboveboard the lad was, it was most likely true. "Then fill out this form. You'll need to enter the field in a few days and accompany the protection detail for the Institute's team."

Li Hao scanned the papers that he was handed—Veteris Institute was sending a team out at the end of the month. There were no particulars, just that a protection detail needed to be on standby.

The secrecy was to prevent vital information from leaking. After all, the Veteris Institute was an acclaimed organization of great value. The proposed mission looked to be difficult if his own teacher was leading the survey team.

I wonder if it'll conflict with the scarlet shadow affair?

More likely than not, the Night Watchers would follow his teacher into the field. It might actually be a good thing if the scarlet shadow chose to attack then.

Various thoughts flashing through his mind, Li Hao quickly filled out the application.

“You can pick up your equipment at the armory.” Wang Jie put the form away.

Li Hao hesitated instead of immediately exiting the office.

“Sir...” he raised haltingly. “Zhang Yuan’s case is a bit... It’s a bit strange. Do you think it involves preternatural forces? Can the Inspectorate really take care of it?”

“Hmm?” Wang Jie flicked a sharp glance at the young man. “What are you getting at?”

“N-nothing,” Li Hao responded awkwardly, then doggedly continued like he couldn’t keep it in. “I’m just worried that the enforcement team might... wake a sleeping lion? Or something unexpected might happen? I hear that we might have another agency...?”

“That’s enough!” Wang Jie’s frown deepened. “Watch what you say! I know that everyone gossips and shares rumors, but these aren’t things that we should discuss. Put all of this out of your mind. Honestly, it’ll be too much hassle if things develop to that stage. A bunch of trouble always follows whenever they send in their own people!”

He didn’t want to say anything else or discuss the Night Watchers. It was never a good thing if they were involved. The situation inevitably turned very complicated and they were sources of immense trouble themselves.

Truth be told, he didn’t want anything to do with the Night Watchers if he could help it. He wasn’t the only one who felt this way; the enforcement team likely didn’t want them involved either.

The Night Watchers intervened only when there was no other option available. Inspectorate preference wouldn’t matter if things devolved to such a state.

Li Hao nodded and raised a final point. “Sir, I notice that each self-immolation case takes place on an overcast or rainy day. We’re about to enter the rainy season and it’s been almost a year since the last incident. If previous pattern holds true and someone’s behind all of this, then the culprit might take action in the near future!”

Wang Jie carefully noted this detail. He was yet to fully familiarize himself with the cases since he’d just taken them over. Hence, he was less familiar with them compared to Li Hao.

“I’ll let the enforcement team know.” Wang Jie nodded after brief thought. “You be careful. Keep a weather eye out when you investigate Zhang Yuan’s house. Do you need me to send additional personnel with you?”

“Nope!” Li Hao shook his head. It wasn’t that he had a death wish, but that adding ordinary people was pointless since they couldn’t see the scarlet shadow.

He had a gun now and made some other arrangements. Everything would be fine if he didn’t encounter the scarlet shadow. Not to mention, most in the Department of Classified Affairs were used to a desk job. Who knew who would be protecting whom if push came to shove?

“Then be careful, but I do think there’s no danger because the boy’s been dead for a year.” Wang Jie waved the lad out of his office.

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Li Hao breathed more easily when he trotted out of the office. *Wang Jie really is looking out for me.*

He headed for the armory with papers of approval and received a black handgun in short order. Metallic to the touch, it was a third generation vortex gun with an effective firing range of fifty meters. Accuracy was negligible beyond that.

Some of the big cities already used the fourth gen that possessed an effective range of one hundred meters. Since Silver City didn't count as a big city, they were yet to be issued those guns in mass quantities. Even their law enforcement team still used third gen.

He was assigned eighteen bullets—six could be loaded at one time and fired repeatedly. It was a very intimidating weapon.

Although Li Hao was assigned to a desk job at the Department of Classified Affairs after joining the Inspectorate, he'd received one month of training. Firearms were part of it, so he knew how to handle a gun.

He was just slightly out of practice.

Confidence duly fortified with a weapon in hand, Li Hao wondered if guns could hurt the scarlet shadow. He could see what others couldn't, so would his shots have an effect?

“Sir Wang indicated that the enforcement team doesn't like to involve the Night Watchers. But time is of the essence—will they be able to handle the scarlet shadow if the Night Watchers don't intervene?”

“What if I tell them I can see the scarlet shadow...” The idea bloomed in Li Hao's mind. Equally quick to arrive were the cases that mentioned people who could see the scarlet shadow. All of them were never heard from again.

Were they dead, or...?

Perhaps the Night Watchers had been involved in the previous cases, but those who could see the shadow were missing or died. *Or perhaps they were recruited into the Night Watchers?*

Uncertainty over the consequences of revealing his abilities made Li Hao struggle for what to do. Revealing what he knew would mean something if the Night Watchers could and would eliminate the scarlet shadow. But what if... the Night Watchers were colluding with the scarlet shadow instead?

If he exposed himself, would the Night Watchers go for the scarlet shadow or himself?

“A mysterious power... That’s what the Night Watchers are and what the scarlet shadow is as well. Are they in cahoots, or are they enemies?” Li Hao couldn’t identify the answer as he lacked relevant channels to gather such information.

The worst case scenario was if the two were colluding with each other and those who’d discovered the scarlet shadow had been permanently silenced!

Enormously conflicted, a headache began to set in. What wouldn’t he give for the Night Watchers to dispose of the scarlet shadow and take revenge for Zhang Yuan and his parents! Yet, what if reality was the direct opposite of his wishes? He might be unnecessarily exposing himself and inviting doom!

“I’ll... wait a few more days...” Although he was in grave danger, Li Hao still wanted to wait a few more days and see what the enforcement team came back with. At the very least, he wanted to assess their attitude.

For now, he was just someone who had discovered the oddities in the self-immolation cases. The enforcement team would surely connect the dots just as quickly if they diligently pursued the matter. If there were shrewd people among them, Li Hao felt that they might contact the Night Watchers ahead of time.

He’d mentioned the possibility of another incident in order to exert pressure on the enforcement team. If he could borrow their hand to bring in the Night Watchers, then he wouldn’t need to reveal that he could see the scarlet shadow.

“Regardless, teacher is leading a field survey team soon, so the Night Watchers have to attend that. Their representatives will be in Silver City after a few days, whether or not they’re permanently stationed here.” Li Hao

temporarily set aside the idea of revealing himself after he processed everything and ascertained that it was very likely the mysterious organization would appear on their own.

He might find out very soon whether or not the two were working with each other. Besides, he could always reveal himself if the Night Watchers didn't pay him a visit before the rain arrived.