

STAR GATE

---- Chapter 7: Affecting the Entire Body By Pulling On One Hair (II)

The blazing sun had set by the time Li Hao walked out of the Inspectorate; there weren't many on the streets as it was a hot and humid day. The sky blushed red as the radiance of night set in. Recently, it was still extremely muggy even at 9pm, so very few people loitered outside.

Li Hao's house wasn't too far from the Inspectorate—just eight kilometers. He wheeled out his bicycle and threw a leg over it. He'd been riding a bike to work over the past year partially to exercise, but also to avoid certain dangers.

It was harder to detect danger in crowded places; Li Hao exercised constant vigilance ever since Zhang Yuan's death.

He glanced around casually after he got on the bike, seemingly checking the road conditions and view ahead. In actuality, he scanned to see if anyone was following him—particularly today, after he confirmed that the scarlet shadow was coming for him next.

How does the shadow target us?

Based off of Li Hao's determination, the scarlet shadow was never present for long. It vanished soon after appearing and spent a very short amount of time outside. In that case, how did it pinpoint the victims with accuracy?

Did that mean there were people observing them from the shadows ahead of time, those who waited for the shadow to reap its harvest?

That wasn't outside the realm of possibility.

Although he hadn't been schooled as an inspector by trade, Li Hao still possessed basic counter-surveillance skills.

“Since I haven’t discovered anything yet, does this mean that the shadow itself can lock onto us? Does it have something to do with my sword? Is it using these family heirlooms to track us?”

The bike moved slowly and the third gen vortex gun rested in the inner pocket of Li Hao’s shirt. His button looked like it was undone to catch the breeze, but it was actually to facilitate the fastest draw speed possible if he needed it.

All was as usual, he didn’t notice anything amiss. But when he reached a downhill slope and coasted to the bottom, his heart skipped a beat.

He caught sight of an oncoming black car out the corner of his eye as he flew downhill. It was a very ordinary car no different from other cars in the other lane of traffic.

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His heart shook. This wasn’t right—he’d just seen the car moments ago. Cars like that were all over the roads. It was a very basic car for commuting and nine out of ten cars were its make, but Li Hao knew this license plate!

He naturally possessed certain strengths to be able to pass the examinations for the Veteris Institute. A strong memory was almost a prerequisite. But if that was his only strong suit, he wouldn’t have caught Yuan Shuo’s eye. The professor wouldn’t have taken Li Hao under his wing.

Something’s wrong—this car was headed in the same direction as me earlier. I’m riding slowly, so it passed me and drove off. That was only seven minutes ago!

Seven minutes at the car’s speed meant that it was on the straight road ahead. There were no good places to stop, and seven minutes were too short to run an errand or drop someone off. That it passed Li Hao on the other side now meant that it’d turned around not long after passing the young man.

Li Hao kept the same noncommittal expression on his face, but waves of emotion reared in his heart.

This has never happened before... Is someone following me? Why?! He quickly thought of a possibility—the case that he'd reported to Wang Jie might have been leaked! There's a mole at the Inspectorate, and it's probably in the law enforcement team!

Li Hao's heart sank with his gut reaction. Even though it might truly just be a coincidence and the car may have simply made a u-turn, he didn't dare treat it as coincidence.

Any coincidence had to be viewed through the lens of premeditation.

“Sir Wang notified the enforcement team about the self-immolation cases, which may have brought attention to me if they know I'm the one who dug all of them out again. If the enforcement team has questions, they can just ask me, they don't need to follow me. On the surface, it looks like I'm paying attention to this only because it involves my classmate...”

My hunch was right! Everyone in the cases who said they could see the scarlet shadow was quickly exposed. I felt there was a mole in the Inspectorate or Night Watchers then!

In his review of the cases, Li Hao discovered that anyone who reported seeing a scarlet shadow quickly died afterward or disappeared. It was a detail difficult to notice if one wasn't paying specific attention to the files.

Inspectors usually glossed over these kinds of cases. They asked their questions, made their reports, and didn't bother following up on nonsense talk of a mysterious shadow.

But someone placed importance on it.

What did that indicate?

That someone in the Inspectorate was specifically fixated on this, that someone else would quickly receive word if anyone called in a tip about a scarlet shadow.

Have I been targeted just because I mentioned the self-immolation cases? Do these people want to see if I can see the scarlet shadow, or if I just happened to discover a connection between the cases?

I didn't dare raise that I saw a shadow when Little Yuan died last year. If these people are familiar with the details, they'll probably think I discovered the connection by accident. They won't think I can see the shadow because if I could, I would've called it in last year! Li Hao thought through and analyzed many things over the span of a few quick seconds.

He was a third rank inspector, after all, one who'd just discovered something awry with the self-immolation cases. Even if there was someone colluding with the scarlet shadow, it didn't seem likely they would take action against him right this very moment. Killing him at this juncture would only confirm something off about the cases and stir up greater trouble.

Well well, aren't things getting interesting!

Li Hao snorted inwardly without a flicker of change in expression. He continued riding forward as if nothing was wrong. The car that he took note of quickly vanished in the gloom.

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A middle-aged man drove the car that'd traveled past Li Hao while a nondescript middle-aged woman sat in the passenger seat. They were a perfectly normal middle-aged couple with nothing special about them.

"Nothing," the woman muttered after they left Li Hao.

The driver didn't seem to hear her.

After a moment, he remarked calmly, “It’s probably just a coincidence. He’s keeping an eye on this because of Zhang Yuan’s death. They were good friends.”

The woman inclined her head. Quiet returned to the interior of the car.

“But we can’t rule out other possibilities,” the driver suddenly said. “Continue keeping an eye on him from a distance. Be careful, those annoying fellows might be coming to Silver City again.”

“Understood!” The woman nodded. She knew who the driver spoke of and they were indeed very annoying.

Silence descended upon the car once more.

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“I’m being watched!” Li Hao stopped his bike before a gated complex and slowly pushed it forward.

“Little Hao’s back!”

“Do you have time for a drink with me tonight, Inspector Li?” The residents relaxing in front of the doors greeted Li Hao enthusiastically.

A third rank inspector was just slightly bigger fry in the Inspectorate, but having one in residence brought a sense of security and authority to a small neighborhood complex. That held true despite Li Hao looking bookish, frail, and utterly lacking in the dignity of inspectors.

“Mmhmm, I’m back!” Li Hao smiled at everyone.

Openlight was an old and slightly run-down complex. The Lis had lived here for many years. In fact, they’d resided here for as long as Li Hao remembered. It was a very small community with only six buildings. Li Hao lived in the innermost building—#302 of Building 6.

He wheeled his bike along the tattered roads rather than ride it home. It'd been a very long time since Openlight's internal roads were last maintained. Potholes and general degradation marked them, which made bike riding a bumpy affair.

Sounds of conversation floated in the air behind him.

"Little Hao's a good enough kid, but he lacks the watchful eye of an elder. He's the type to need a guiding hand! Just look at him, finally making it into the Veteris Institute, but then withdrawing from school to be an inspector. What a pity!"

"Now now, the Inspectorate is just as good. He's got a job for life!"

"Sure it's a secure job, but his future would be so much brighter as a Veteris graduate, not to mention how much more money he would make!"

People weren't keeping their voices down, but such words had often been repeated over the past year. Li Hao neither cared about them nor explained himself. There was no need.

He was considering what had just happened and how he should react. The gun in his shirt offered some degree of safety, but not much.

"I don't know enough about this mysterious faction watching me and my strength in battle is limited. I'd just be an ordinary person without the gun."

He had a few classes on wrestling and arresting others under his belt—not only did the Inspectorate require it, but he'd learned from his teacher during his two years at the Institute. Yuan Shuo was a master of melee fighting in addition to being a scholar. Rather than use his skills to pick fights, the professor practiced to temper his body and grow accustomed to various environments as fast as possible.

As his teacher once said, knowing these skills would, at the very least, enable him to run faster in the face of danger. Every Veteris professor could potentially encounter danger whenever they journeyed outside.

Thus, Li Hao knew a little of fighting, but he wasn't very well versed. He'd studied for a total of three years and could easily handle thugs and hooligans. But compared to veteran inspectors? He didn't amount to much.

"The identity of an inspector may not be as deterring as I thought. I don't know how long I can keep this under wraps." A black shadow darted past him as he mused, and Li Hao subconsciously raised his foot to kick it.

He quickly retracted his limb.

A small black dog stopped in front of him. Instead of barking, it looked eagerly at Li Hao like it was anticipating something. The young man smiled and parked his bike.

"You seem to have gotten faster, Panth."

Panth, or rather Panther, wasn't a name that suited the skinny and feeble dog. Li Hao gave it an impressive name all the same. It wasn't his dog, but a stray that wandered into the complex from somewhere.

Li Hao lived alone and sometimes had leftovers. It was wasteful to dump them, so he occasionally fed the poor creature. The dog seemed to take Li Hao for its owner after a few months and didn't wander around much anymore. It often sprawled at the entrance to Building 6, waiting for the young man to get off work.

Other building residents knew that Li Hao fed it, so while some were afraid of dogs, no one dared chase off the dog of a third rank inspector. They gradually became used to Panther as it was quiet and biddable.

Li Hao stooped down to scratch the dog's head. Living alone became a very lonely affair after a while. Many things accumulated in the heart, so it was nice to have a dog for company. Sadly, he was usually too busy to offer much care. The most he could do was put out some food when he came home at night. Sometimes he put out dog food during the day; Panther was left to its own devices when he forgot.

"Arf!" the little black dog barked.

"Dinner's coming." Li Hao smiled warmly, a smile that was much more real than what he wore at work. He got to his feet and walked upstairs.

He lived in a dilapidated building with a shabby staircase. The railing was rusted and half of the residents had moved out of the six stories. Only a few retirees were left now. Li Hao hadn't moved away because he neither had the money to buy a new place, nor did he want to move after his parents died. This was where he'd always lived.

Panther followed Li Hao up the stairs, running eagerly at the boy's side.