

# STAR GATE

## - Chapter 8: Panther

*Unit 302.*

The inside was dim as the curtains were tightly closed. Li Hao pushed the front door open and walked into a moderately sized room of sixty square meters. Panther didn't follow him in, instead opting to sprawl at the threshold and waiting to be fed.

The young man wasn't in a mood to cook today. He rummaged for dog food of unknown expiry date, took out Panther's food bowl, dumped a decent portion in, and set it outside of the doorway.

"Arf!" Panther wagged his tail and looked at Li Hao, seemingly saying something.

"I didn't buy groceries after work, so we'll have to make do," the young man explained. Though he didn't understand Dog, it was fine. Panther was probably complaining about a dinner that was almost expired. "Just having something to eat is good enough. You might not even have this in a few days. You'll have to scrounge on your own then."

Li Hao stooped down and laughed at the little black dog taking unwilling bites of its dinner. He took out the vortex gun from his shirt, thought about it for a bit, then took off the jade sword around his neck.

He held it up to the light and sank into deep contemplation. Did the jade sword have something to do with the mysterious power that was the scarlet shadow? Were the eight families of the folk song also involved with the mysterious power?

But nothing special was forthcoming from the jade sword after all these years. All those stories about claiming or activating a treasure with blood—he'd

gotten hurt countless times when he was young and often splashed it with his blood. Nothing had ever happened.

“Stellaris!” he murmured. Was this what the scarlet shadow was after?

“Arf!” Panther suddenly paused munching and barked at the sword.

Li Hao looked sideways at him. Tail waving hesitantly, the dog faced the jade sword and looked like it wanted to come forward, but didn’t dare to. It maintained a bit of distance and stared, wide-eyed, at the sword.

Li Hao lifted an eyebrow and suddenly stabbed the pendant at Panther in a moment of inspiration. The dog sprang upward and hopped aside in an extremely swift reaction.

*That’s surprising.* Panther didn’t run away after dodging the blow; the dog barked at Li Hao with an aggrieved look.

“Hmm?” Both of Li Hao’s eyebrows shot up. Was Panth afraid of this?

*How interesting.*

Folktales spoke of white cats and black dogs sometimes seeing things that humans couldn’t. Did the black dog see something in the sword?

Panther was very smart, of that Li Hao was well aware of. All dogs were quite smart. If Panther wasn’t, it wouldn’t hang around and refuse to leave. It knew there was food to be had here.

“C’mere Panth!” Li Hao beckoned it over. Panther hesitated before tentatively picking its way to the young man. Its eyes were fixed on the jade sword all the while.

“Arf!” The dog was somewhat afraid at first, but gradually got over its fear because Li Hao was present. Meanwhile, the young man’s brows knitted together as he followed the dog’s reaction. There was definitely something special about the sword.

As he mused over possibilities, something flashed in front of his eyes. Li Hao's hand lightened before he had a chance to react. When his vision cleared, he realized that Panther had swallowed the jade sword.

"What the fuck?!" Li Hao froze, then sprang forward and grabbed the dog's mouth. "Spit it out!"

*Damn it! What's gotten into the dog? It doesn't normally fight for food when I feed it. It seems to be asking for a yelling today!*

It'd been afraid at first and pounced as soon as Li Hao's attention lapsed. The heck was that all about?

A feint? Something to get him to relax his guard? So even dogs knew how to scheme these days?

"Arooooo!" Panther refused to open its mouth.

Li Hao grew irritated and closed one hand on the dog's mouth, grabbing the dog's tail with the other. Panther wouldn't get a chance to run away or bite someone else.

"You ingrate, you good-for-nothing! I wasted all that good food on you! This is a family heirloom, don't you dare eat it! Spit it out!"

Li Hao let go of the tail and grabbed the dog's neck, using his other hand to force Panther's mouth open.

"Arooooo!" The little black dog refused to give up its prize, but the human proved to be stronger and forced its mouth open.

The jade sword was in Panther's mouth. Li Hao wordlessly regarded the pendant with some disdain, but Stellaris was very important. He had to reclaim it even though it was dirty, so he fished it out of the dog's mouth and smacked Panther with annoyance.

“I feed you, you know?? You completely ignore me when it’s important, you ingrate of a dog!” Li Hao cursed for a bit, startled by the normally biddable dog. Why was Panther suddenly acting out? He really was too relaxed around the dog—it could have easily made off with the family heirloom!

“They say that a dog that bites doesn’t bark. That suits you, alright!” Li Hao swore a bit more, rolling his eyes at the sticky jade sword.

*Gross!*

“Arf arf!” Panther stopped struggling and stared yearningly at the jade sword with none of its earlier hesitation. Its tongue lolled like it wanted to lick the sword again, but Li Hao delivered a disdainful smack to its nose. The tongue quickly retreated back into its mouth.

“Arf arf!” Panther knew who the boss was and quickly turned a pleading gaze onto Li Hao. There were equal parts plea and equal parts fawning intent in it, as if it deeply wished to lick the sword again.

Li Hao automatically grimaced with distaste, then paused with a frown. He considered the little dog anew—Panther didn’t act like this normally. He wouldn’t have fed it if it wasn’t very docile. It sometimes drooled over food in his hands, but it never came forward if Li Hao didn’t hold the food out in welcome.

“Do you want to eat this?” Li Hao waved the jade sword around. Panther looked at it raptly, but seemed conflicted. It appeared to determine something before it... shook its head.

“Huh?” Li Hao blinked. Did the dog understand him?

Dogs eventually gained an understanding of their humans, so it was normal for them to understand keywords. What did Panther mean by shaking its head? It didn’t want to eat the sword?

*Then why do you keep looking at it? And you stole it just now, too.*

“Weirdo,” Li Hao murmured. There must be something special about Stellaris; the possibility occurred to him when he heard the folk song. But it really had seemed very ordinary during all of these years.

Today, an urge to inspect it closely struck him, which was why he’d taken it out when Panther was beside him. Who knew this series of events would happen next?

If it wasn’t for the folk song stirring his curiosity about the jade sword, Li Hao might wear it for his entire life without taking it off to truly look at it.

And Panther would never have a chance to eat it.

“So Panth really wants this... because it’s that tempting? Does this only apply to Panth, or to all dogs? What’s so special about Stellaris?” Li Hao’s thoughts wandered off again, a fact that the little dog quickly took advantage of.

Panther stuck its tongue out and slurped the jade sword, also covering Li Hao’s hand with spit.

The young man screwed up his face with disgust and smacked the dog’s head again, wiping his hand on the dog’s fur.

“You won’t get any more food from me in the future if you keep trying to take it!”

“Arf arf!” Panther shook its head again and furiously wagged its tail, as if saying that it wasn’t trying to take the jade sword. It was just licking the item.

A sense of something being off with the situation brewed. Li Hao looked at the dog, then at the jade sword. It was so dirty that he’d have to clean it with water. Thus, he raised the sword. “Do you still want to lick it?”

Panther nodded!

“Has it gained a spirit??” Li Hao’s eyes widened. *The heck!* Panth was smart before, but not like this. It seemed to fully understand everything he said today.

Thinking it over, Li Hao gingerly offered up the sword. The little dog looked carefully at the young man before extending its tongue, licking the sword. Satisfaction shone out of its eyes—satiation after eating its fill.

“Why does Panth want to lick this? Does it taste good?”

*Bull!*

Li Hao had licked it a fair number of times when he was a kid. His thoughts wandered off as he took a trip down memory lane. *Father didn’t wash this when he gave it to me, did he? I’ve... definitely licked it a few times!*

Had a dog ever licked it when his father owned it, or when it was passed through the family?

If one had... or even if one hadn’t, it was dirty and full of germs. Who knew how many people had worn it before and he’d often held it in his mouth when he was young!

“Gross, I need to stop thinking about this.” Li Hao shook his head and tried to put it out of his mind. Humans already ate so many disgusting things, so it was best not to think too hard.

“Panth’s a bit abnormal today, but that also means there is indeed something special about Stellaris.” Li Hao’s mind ran rapidly through a variety of possibilities. He rose to his feet to wash his hand and the jade sword.

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The young man walked to the kitchen and washed his hands, then poured a bowl of water and tossed the jade sword into it. He needed to disinfect it first before doing anything else. He was going to Zhang Yuan’s house in a bit, so the jade sword needed to go back around his neck.

Potential theft would gnaw at his mind if he left it at home, and what if the jade sword was a protective amulet? It might be useful if he ran into the scarlet shadow, so Li Hao didn't dare go anywhere without it.

Perhaps the jade sword had played a factor in the scarlet shadow not immediately going for him after killing Zhang Yuan last year.

Immersing it in potable water for a bit, Li Hao took out the sword and placed it under running water. He was about to pour the bowl down the drain when he sensed movement underfoot.

"Arf arf!" Panther followed him in!

Concerned about the dog shedding and being too lazy to clean up, Li Hao usually didn't let Panther inside. The little black dog was a model student and never set foot over the threshold, but it followed the young man to the kitchen today!

Li Hao looked down and saw an eager doggy gaze directed at the bowl in his hand. It contained the water that he'd used to clean the jade sword.

He placed the bowl on the ground when a thought occurred to him. Panther ignored the fact that the water was boiling hot and furiously lapped at it. It preferred to whine from a burned tongue than stop drinking.

"Huh? The water... used to clean the jade sword?" Certain speculations came together in Li Hao's mind. Was there something special about the water that the jade sword had been immersed in? "But that's still not right. I licked it so many times when I was a kid and nothing special ever happened."

He naturally ceased such pointless actions after he grew up, so he was very surprised at what was unfolding in front of him. Some strangeness was certainly afoot as Panther's matted and coarse black hair turned soft and smooth at a pace visible to the naked eye. Its tail seemed to be wagging faster as well.

“It’s the water that was used to clean the sword! Is there some sort of mysterious power in it? Weird... Is this the proper way to use the jade sword?” Li Hao stooped down and caressed the dog. Its fur was markedly different! It was smoother than before and not as prickly.

Eyes snapping to the jade sword, the young man regarded it with an ardent expression. Was the logic that any water used to submerge the sword would end up containing mysterious energy? Was what he’d been looking for, the mysterious power that his hand reached out for, possibly in this bowl?

“If... if this is real... then a dog showed me how to use my family heirloom??”

The key point was that Panther had licked the sword earlier. Although Li Hao still found it unsanitary despite running it under boiling water. Of course, if this was truly the way, then he... well, it wouldn’t be the dog licking it then.

Even if Li Hao did find the act a bit gross.

“Does Stellaris contain a mysterious power that can only be accessed through water? Does it have to be dunked in water for the power to diffuse so that others can absorb it?” Li Hao’s thoughts flew rapidly. It wasn’t a natural occurrence that suddenly gave Panther a coat of soft and smooth fur. It had to be some sort of esoteric, supernatural power.

Li Hao suddenly didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. A dog was showing him the proper way of accessing Stellaris? He looked wordlessly at Panther.

The little black dog looked up with satisfaction when it finished drinking. Its tail wagged faster when it saw Li Hao’s gaze and a new light of intelligence gleamed from its eyes.

“I feel like... Panther is fully aware now!” Li Hao’s jaw dropped. Was the sword that useful? He looked at it with a fervent stare. Panther was fine after drinking it and gained certain benefits, so what about him?



*Can I drink it?*

*If I do, will I somehow gain arcane power?*

Danger abounded around him, so it might very well save his life if he could obtain some mysterious power of his own before facing the scarlet shadow!

“I won’t die if I drink it, will I?”

He shouldn’t, since he’d licked it so many times as a child. Panther was just an ordinary dog and perfectly fine after licking and drinking its water.

Whatever was harmless for Panth was likely harmless for him.

“Why don’t I give it a try...” Li Hao couldn’t control himself after the impulse rooted in his heart. He wanted strength!

*Zhang Yuan’s death, being followed today, the scarlet shadow, the Night Watchers...*

He craved strength as all of this cycled through his thoughts. He’d plotted his way into the Inspectorate because he wanted to come in contact with the Night Watchers and peek into the occult side of the world.

He had to seize the chance when it was right in front of him!

“I’m going to give it a try. I’ll only die if something happens. The scarlet shadow is about to arrive and the Night Watchers may not be reliable. The Inspectorate is full of buffoons, so there’s no one I can rely on or trust. What do I have to lose?

“Let’s do it!” Li Hao swiftly came to a decision and smacked Panther on the head again, sending the dog into a daze.

“If this really does prove effective,” the young man muttered in high spirits, “then there will be plenty of good days to come, Panth. We’ll eat like kings and think nothing more of it!”

“Arf!” Panther barked, expectation brimming in its eyes. It really seemed to be fully sentient and quite eager for the good days that Li Hao spoke of.

etvolare's Thoughts

I'm with you Li Hao, gross Panth. Can you not?