

Chapter 4 – Shen Xiang

I had a nightmare that night. It started with me and Xiaoli walking down the alley. Then Itsuki lunged out of the shadows and killed her. Screaming, I dropped to my knees next to her only to find Hina's face looking up at me. Then Itsuki laughed and dragged me into a bar to play pool. In the corner, I saw Dad, deep in conversation with Johan Saito, the both of them occasionally glancing in our direction. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but the word "disappointed" reached my ears over and over again. I woke up with a hoarse gasp, and couldn't get back to sleep for what seemed like hours.

It took about a day to break into Elder Qing's dimensional pendant. It didn't contain much, but there was a clue that led to a file folder hidden in his hotel room. That, in turn, led us down a few more paths. But in the end, we didn't get much concrete information, only a handful of hints pointing to the First Earth: Elder Qing had traveled there on vacation; he had items in his room that were generally only found for sale in that Earth; he even had a business card with his own name on it and a First Earth phone number.

Three days later, Itsuki and I ran out of leads to follow up on. At that point, Yu Yitai instructed us to travel to the First Earth and look into one individual in particular. Grand Eldress Shen Xiang. According to Yu Yitai, she was over seven hundred years old and had supported him through thick and thin throughout all those centuries. Given that she was a member of the Grand Council that led the Naturalism Sect, it seemed unthinkable that she could be a traitor, yet the evidence was leaning in that direction.

According to his speculations, if a grand elder was involved in the conspiracy, and the conspiracy was tied to the First Earth, it was highly likely to be her. There were only four grand elders in the Naturalism Sect, with two assigned to the Dark Earths, one to the Bright Earths, and one to all nine of the Heavens. Shen Xiang administered the Bright Earths, and therefore, she was first on the list of suspects.

We didn't have the time to go into much more detail with Yu Yitai, but he didn't seem particularly surprised by the development, which made sense to me. The conspiracy had come to light in the Fourth Earth, which was part of the Bright Earths. I hadn't asked exactly how the sect's emergency protocols usually played out, but although the message the puppetized Eldress Cheung asked me to send was supposedly directed to 'the grand elders,' it had most likely gone directly to Shen Xiang. And that meant Yu Yitai must have suspected her from early on. He had most likely sent us here to the Third Earth in the hopes of digging up some corroborating evidence.

With a careful application of my Igneus Mask, Itsuki and I broke into a Black Corpse facility and, using her ID number as provided by Yu Yitai, printed out Shen Xiang's file. Then

we left for the First Earth in our beat-up hovercar, our travel permit having been handled by Svea.

After the boarding procedures were over, we sat in the muscle car surrounded by piano music and the darkness of the vert-rail vehicle transport hold. We were finally making our way closer to the Third Heaven, where, at long last, I would have my chance to see Mom again. And Charlotte as well. Was this the last time I would ever see the Third Earth? Maybe.

I stared out into the darkness beyond the window, thoughts meandering.

Eventually, Itsuki said, "You've been quiet."

"Yeah."

"Because of what happened with Hina?"

I nodded.

When it became clear I wasn't going to say anything further, he started tapping the steering wheel. "I'm sorry. I was... out of line. I got angry and jumped the gun. It was your personal matter, and I didn't have the right to take the decision away from you."

I was frankly surprised to hear Itsuki talking like this and wasn't sure what to say in response.

"I thought I was doing the right thing," he continued, "but... I guess I made the wrong choice."

"Sometimes there's no right choice," I replied softly. "That's what my dad would say."

"Sounds like a smart man."

I wrestled with what to say next and finally opted for, "Why'd you do it, Itsuki? I felt like we were in the middle of discussing what to do, and then... you took her life. She had her hands tied behind her. She couldn't even fight."

He tapped the wheel a bit more. "Like it or not, I'm a killer," he said. "Trained to kill. Used to it. And I stand by what I said before. There's nowhere in the Grand Kingdom you could have found justice for Xiaoli. Wang Xiaoli." He shook his head briefly. "Sorry, I shouldn't throw her given name around. But... I feel like I kind of knew her. From the way you've talked about her, and from knowing you, I can tell she was a good person."

“She was. And you don’t need to be so formal. If she met you, I bet the first thing she’d say would be to call her by her given name.”

He suddenly gripped the steering wheel tightly with both hands. “It’s all so *stupid*, Wang Fan. Those orgplants... they’re evil. And that’s coming from me! Xiaoli was just trying to figure out the truth about what was happening, and they sent Hina out to *kill* her. It wasn’t fair or just. So in the heat of the moment, I executed justice. At least... that’s what I was thinking.”

“I get it.”

He turned to look at me. “You think it was wrong, don’t you?”

I exhaled slowly. “I honestly don’t know. Up front, yeah. But deep down inside, I’m not sure. In any case, maybe in the future... let’s take our time before we resort to lethal force. What do you think?”

“Sure, I can do that.”

We spent the rest of the trip in silence, as I was still trying to come to terms with everything, and presumably, Itsuki was doing the same.

As we drove out of the vert-rail station and into the crowded traffic of the First Earth, I finally managed to clear my mind to a certain degree. *Forget about death*, I thought. *Focus on life. It won’t be long now before you can hug Mom again. That’s going to make it all worth it.*

It was raining hard, as was common here, where the First Earth and Ninth Heaven formed the center of the hourglass shape that was the Grand Kingdom in general. More water passed through this area than anywhere else in the monolithic structure that we called home. I’d often wondered why the water couldn’t be flushed outside, but instead had to run downward through the Shields. At school, the teachers taught that it had something to do with filtration, but nowadays, I wondered if that was true.

Given the fact that there were only two Ring Roads here in the First Earth, it seemed dramatically more cramped than the areas farther up. More high-rises. More aerial lanes of traffic. More of everything, in a tighter space. And all of it soaked with almost constant rainfall.

The glow of neon signs and traffic lights provided plenty of illumination, so once we were on the street, I pulled out Shen Xiang’s file and started going through it.

"This thing is pretty empty," I said. After glancing at the initial details, I flipped back to the Threat Rating section. "There's only one surveillance entry. *915-05-01 – Overheard at a grocery store telling a child that cultivators aren't dangerous.*"

"915? That was what, thirteen years ago? She's good. Careful and good. What's her Threat Rating?"

"Two."

"It's hard to get lower than that."

"How do the Threat Ratings work, anyway? I remember Jakobe was a four."

"One is the lowest, six is the highest. Most adults end up at a two or three. It's possible to reach a rating of two if you aren't heard saying enough pro-Sinotech slogans."

"I can't believe a grand elder in the sect rates that low."

"She wouldn't be a grand elder if she was that careless. Besides, after a certain age, most cultivators switch identities and get a new ID number. Usually every fifteen or twenty years. For all you know, she intentionally said 'cultivators aren't dangerous' so her record wouldn't be too clean."

"Makes sense. There isn't much to work with here, but we do have a home address, phone number, a few known associates, some employment history. Looks like she works at a nail salon. Has museum passes."

"Let's get a hotel, then we can split duties. You surveil, I investigate. Or the other way around."

As luck would have it, there was a seedy hotel just across the street from where she lived, and we got a room that overlooked the front entrance to her building. I volunteered for surveillance duty and let Itsuki do the asking around. It wasn't very difficult to start tailing Shen Xiang when she left for work. I was skeptical that it would do any good. If she could go for decades without the Corpses gathering anything other than a single passing mention of cultivators, I doubted she would be foolish enough to openly do something that either the sect or Sinotech might find suspicious.

The day was completely uneventful, as all she did was go to work and then return home. I kept an eye on all her clients. More than half of them were walk-ins, and those who had appointments didn't strike me as being anything other than ordinary citizens. Itsuki was

in the hotel room when I returned. He looked at me questioningly as I entered, and I shook my head. “Nothing,” I said. “What about you?”

“Not much. She’s very, very careful. If I didn’t know it, I wouldn’t have any clue she’s a cultivator, much less one of the highest-ranking elites in the entire Grand Kingdom.”

I plopped into a plastic chair next to the window and looked down at the entrance to her building. “You eat?”

“No. How about I get us some fried noodles from the place downstairs?”

“That’ll work.”

He returned ten minutes later with a pair of to-go boxes. The noodles were good, but not as good as the vendor carts in the neighborhoods around the 35th precinct back in the Third Earth.

After eating, we did a bit of sword training. I knew that I’d never get even close to Itsuki’s level of skill, but I was already good enough to feel comfortable with light sparring.

After warming up and going through the forms, Itsuki said, “You’re doing well with the basics, so I’m going to teach you a trick you can use with divine sense. Pull it off right, and it can save your life. For instance, if you’re facing a swordsman while unarmed. Watch.”

In my belief, these training sessions were the source of the tenuous bond forming between the two of us. After all, a soul oath could create a certain level of forced trust, but it couldn’t create a friendship.

Itsuki and I had our differences across the board, but if there was one thing that had been deeply ingrained in both of us from a young age, one thing that we shared, it was a love of martial arts. When we settled into sword stances across from each other and our eyes met, everything else faded away, and our world became one of skill and combat.

The clatter of the wooden practice swords. The sting of blows incorrectly parried. The thrill of a strike properly delivered. In those moments, we weren’t thinking about our differences. And I had to admit, Itsuki was a pretty good teacher.

The next day passed uneventfully, as did the following day. When we had free time, we did sword training or meditated to further our cultivation. Of course, it wasn’t the time or place to consider striving toward any major breakthroughs, so we kept things simple. We also went over contingency plans for emergencies. For instance, Itsuki explained how the Corpses trained to deal with cultivators.

“The vast majority of Corpse training relates to fighting cultivators in dense urban environments. In apartment buildings, alleys, places like that. If you really want to screw with the heads of a lance of Corpses, get them to fight out in the open. They’re too used to thinking in straight lines. Corridors. Roofs over their heads. To get the jump on them, do something they aren’t expecting.

“Also, combine cultivation techniques. Think about it. The vast, vast majority of Naturalism Sect cultivators only have one or two seas of energy. And that’s what the Corpses train to deal with, primarily. Hit them with some sort of combo, and you can get the heads rolling before they have any idea what’s going on.”

My hope was that we didn’t have to deal with any Corpses, but if we did, at least I had some idea of how to turn the tables on them.

Three days passed by at a crawl.

I kept having nightmares, all of them variations on the original dream from the day Hina died. Sometimes Xiaoli walked next to me in the alley, other times it was Hina. I still wasn’t sure why I kept thinking about Xiaoli’s killer. About Itsuki’s blade ripping out her throat. She’d been about to say something about her parents, that they needed her income for something, but what? Curse treatment? To help pay rent? I couldn’t help but wonder if Hina had siblings or other relatives.

On multiple occasions, I’d woken up screaming. At first, it had startled Itsuki awake, causing him to jump up and ask what was wrong. Eventually, he stopped reacting, although I couldn’t imagine that he simply slept through my outbursts.

We took turns on surveillance and investigation but didn’t find even a scrap of evidence or new information about Grand Eldress Shen Xiang. She was too good. In fact, she was so careful, she even managed to vanish right out from underneath Itsuki’s nose when it came time for her to attend her weekly cultivator meeting.

“Did she realize you were following her?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. I get the feeling it’s part of her routine. She has a Thermal root, so all she needs to do is go invisible or use an Igneus Mask at the right time, and it would be impossible to stay on her. I mean, you did that to me after practicing with a Thermal Ripple Cloak for a few months.”

The next day, our fourth in the First Earth, we checked in with Yu Yitai, and he provided a general update regarding the work being done by the rest of the coterie. With the help of Jakobe and Bunny, Yu Yitai’s tasks in the Third Heaven were nearly complete. When

asked, he said that Jakobe had experienced more dreams, but that they were “too muddled to be of use.” Meanwhile, Svea, Tao Heng, and Elena had completed their assignment in the Sixth Heaven and had just arrived in the Fourth Heaven. Everything was going according to schedule, with the exception of the work being done by Itsuki and me.

928-12-08 05:18 AM – YYT: GO AHEAD AND CONFRONT SHEN XIANG. JUST BE VERY CAREFUL. FOCUS ON TRYING TO GET INFORMATION, NOT GETTING INTO A FIGHT. THAT SAID, IF THINGS DO TURN VIOLENT, BE VERY CAREFUL.

The time had come to confront Shen Xiang. We had the blessing of the sect leader, and on paper, were far superior to her in cultivation level. She was only a one-diamond cultivator, and despite having an additional three roots and two seas, the fact that I had two diamonds, two roots, and one sea put me almost exactly on the same level as her. Add Itsuki into the mix, and we definitely had her outmatched.

However, there was the wildcard of the chitinous armor. Yu Yitai still hadn’t given us anything other than a warning that it could make her incredibly strong. If she had an asset like that, or something similar, we could be walking into a potentially deadly combat situation.

Itsuki kept his mini Bohr Fulmina Convertor ready, and I had my dimensional pendant stuffed with plenty of gear. Itsuki had one final Eightfold Restoration Pill, taken from his father’s dimensional device, and I had a healthy collection of Pure Cloud Pills. We also had some teleportation discs. Hopefully, we wouldn’t need to use any of them.

The plan was to follow the grand eldress until she ducked into a side alley that led through a residential complex, which she usually did on her way to work. Itsuki, being more experienced with his Gravitational cultivation base, would be on the rooftops and would drop down into the alley when appropriate.

When Shen Xiang emerged from her apartment building in the morning, I was waiting across the street next to some vendor stalls. She looked like a middle-aged woman with long, braided hair. Like many Firsters, she wore utilitarian garments of denim and olive-green fabric, as well as a high-collared jacket. It was fashionable, but at the same time, simple. Remaining beneath a translucent umbrella, she began her daily trek to work, and I crossed the street and followed close behind her on the crowded sidewalk.

Sure enough, two blocks down from her apartment, she turned into a trash-filled alley that connected two major streets, but was narrow enough that it remained mostly empty. The buildings on either side of the alley were mostly five to six stories tall, although a few were high-rises.

I followed her, feeling quivery from both nervousness and anticipation.

She walked about forty feet into the alley, then stopped in place and turned to look at me.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

I wasn’t surprised she noticed me, as I hadn’t exactly been trying to stay out of sight. “A friend from up in the Ninth sent me. A Mr. Yu. I have a few questions I’m hoping you can answer.”

The rain beat down around us as she looked at me. “I’m afraid I’m late for work. Perhaps later in the evening.” She turned to continue heading down the alley, except that Itsuki dropped down from above to block her path.

“We’re also on a tight schedule,” he said.

I felt a tingle as her divine sense tried to scan me, but I kept the details of my cultivation base away from her. Itsuki must have done the same, as she said, “Well isn’t this interesting. There are crouching tigers and hidden dragons in the Naturalism Sect that even *I’m* unaware of. Both of you are at the diamond level?”

“Yes,” I said. “And we’re more than well enough equipped to use force if necessary. Please, Grand Eldress, let’s not do this the hard way.”

She casually turned her back to Itsuki and faced me. “Very well. What exactly is the easy way?”

I produced a paliprox patch. “This.”

“You want me to turn myself over to you, bereft of my cultivation base, making me completely helpless. You, who I have never met before and don’t know. You, who could well be a pair of Black Corpses.”

I waved my finger and summoned a command medallion Yu Yitai had given me, identifying me as an official patriarch of the sect. Tossing it to her, I said, “Take a look. A lot has changed recently in the Naturalism Sect.”

She caught the medallion and examined it.

“Aha. Wang Fan. Or ‘Patriarch’ Wang Fan, I suppose. I’ve heard a lot about you. Your friend over there must be Tao Heng.”

Neither Itsuki nor I bothered to correct her. In fact, it was a welcome revelation that she wasn't familiar with our faces.

"Who exactly have you heard about us from?" I asked. "Elder Qing?"

She smiled, but didn't say anything.

"Or could it have been Nicolas Kun?" Itsuki said. Suddenly, his arms both turned brilliant white, and the rain that hit them sizzled loudly and turned into wisps of water vapor.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. "Why don't we step out of the alley and head to the teahouse around the corner to talk things over?"

"First, this." I held up the paliprox patch. She tossed the medallion back to me, and I threw her the patch.

"Fine," she said. She stuck one hand into her pocket, and I heard the faintest of cracking sounds. A teleportation slip.

"Sorry, Grand Eldress," Itsuki said. "You won't be slipping away that easily. Put on the patch."

She looked over her shoulder at him. "I don't think I will."

She bent at the knees and sent a Sunflare Beam shooting toward him, forcing Itsuki to jump to the side. As she fixed her attention back on me, my fingers interlocked and twisted as I tapped into my Wind sea of energy for the first time in combat.

The stiff Gale Barrage battered at her, but didn't seem to have the slightest effect. Before anything else could happen, she snapped her finger, and to my dismay, chitinous armor spread out rapidly to cover her arm.

Shit, I knew it, I thought, summoning my cultivator robe.