

Chapter 5 – Armor

Shen Xiang started walking toward me, and the way her eyes glittered with darkness caused an unusual sensation to grip my heart. Terror.

I wasn't the kind of person to scare easily, but I knew the taste of fear. In the moment Johan Saito lifted a knife over me in the True Heaven, I'd felt it. And in the final moments of the dramatic battle in which I first formed my Duhkha Cannon, the thought of failing had caused my heart to pound, because I knew it would have meant death for me and my allies.

This was different.

As the chitin crawled across her skin toward her neck, she smiled and ran her tongue across the twisted curve of her upper lip. Long claws emerged from her fingers.

I involuntarily took a step backward, the hair on the back of my neck rising of its own accord.

"Are you ready to die?" she said, her voice reverberating.

For the first time since I'd been a rookie Peacekeeper on patrol duty, I froze. Something deep inside of me screamed that this was something I couldn't fight, that if I just remained quiet and small, maybe it would pass me by. I stared at her eyes as she walked toward me, a monster stalking a feeble human.

The chitin reached her jaw, then covered her face, and while her eyes remained exposed, they turned as black as a dead computer screen.

Move, Wang Fan. Fight. Use a Sunflare Blast. Pillars of Sol. Igneus Mask. You have to do something! I screamed at myself to take action but remained rooted in place, unable to do anything.

A three-foot-wide circle of pure light appeared in the ground in front of me, slowly rising up in the shape of a pillar. I shifted my eyes away from Shen Xiang's to look at it, and at that moment, my mind started working again.

That's Pillars of Sol. It's Itsuki. If he hadn't taken the initiative, would I have just stood in place and let her kill me? I didn't know, and there wasn't time to ponder the issue now.

Shen Xiang stopped walking toward me and turned around, the chitin still spreading out over her. It was now extending down her other arm as well as her torso, covering her with overlapping plates that reminded me of the body of an insect. It seemed to be moving much faster than it had with Elder Qing.

“You have a Solar diamond?” she asked Itsuki.

He let the pillar rise up to a height of ten feet, creating a significant barrier between the grand eldress and me. “I... I do,” he said, and I could detect the faintest tremor in his voice. Was he being affected by the same fear that had struck me? If so, he shook it off much faster. “Mind telling me about that armor of yours? I’d like to know what it is after I kill you and take it.”

She laughed. “Other than Patriarch Nguyễn, I’m the only one in the sect who has a Solar diamond. So who are you?”

I shook my head to clear it further. What was my next move? Of the cultivation techniques at my disposal, neither Thermal nor Gravitational abilities were very useful in terms of direct combat application. If Shen Xiang was anything like Elder Qing, invisibility wouldn’t help much, and moving fast would only give me ancillary benefits. My Wind sea of energy let me use Gale Barrage, but a stiff breeze obviously wasn’t going to do anything to the grand eldress, and I doubted Baromatrix would be very effective. My Solar diamond could unleash devastating attacks, but Itsuki had the same assets. Should I resort to my cannon before the fighting had even started?

In response to Shen Xiang’s question, Itsuki said, “I’m not a member of the Naturalism Sect.”

“So, you’re not Tao Heng?” she said, this time walking smoothly in Itsuki’s direction. “Well, I guess it doesn’t matter who you are.” The chitin rippled past her hips and down her thighs. She was almost completely covered in the stuff, making her a mass of glossy black and yellow, many of the plates covered in spiky protrusions.

Yes, it was time for the Duhkha Cannon.

As I tapped into my energy and started forming the weapon, Itsuki threw out a Sunflare Blast, which Shen Xiang easily dodged. Breaking into a run, she accelerated toward him with a speed that clearly surpassed that of a Gravitational root cultivator. In the blink of an eye, she loomed over him with a clawed right hand raised behind her shoulder.

He spun to the side, his sword appearing as he slashed toward the only non-armored part of her body still visible: her feet. The weapon hit just above her ankle, and she shouted

as the blade bit deep into her tibia, lodging itself so firmly there that Itsuki had to release his grip on the hilt. He barely managed to duck beneath her slashing claws, then danced backward, leaving his sword embedded in her leg.

Shen Xiang cursed as the chitin armor spread down to cover her feet, and along the way, the sword. Then the sword popped out of her leg and landed next to her. Reaching down, she grabbed it with one hand and broke it in half.

“That was annoying,” she said, then took a step toward him.

I leveled the Duhkha Cannon and sent the grayish-black light down the alley to land on the small of her back. Except, as soon as the light touched her, it slid away like a drop of oil landing on the glossy, painted surface of a hovercar.

Shit, there's no way. I tried again, with the same result. I couldn't paint Shen Xiang with the cannon's targeting function! What was this armor?

Hefting the cannon, I tried to aim it as I would a normal gun, except there were no sights to align. Shifting the firing mode to the Slug setting, I mentally pulled the trigger, and the weapon purred as a bullet erupted from the middle barrel. It was like an oblong bone pellet that sped toward her with hardly a sound to mark its passage.

My aim was good. The bone bullet slammed into her shoulder with so much force she spun through the air before landing on her side in a pile of trash.

Reaching out to Itsuki with divine sense, I said, “I CAN'T PAINT HER WITH THE GUN. THE ARMOR PREVENTS IT.”

“USE BURST MODE,” he replied

“YEAH. GET OUT OF THE WAY.”

As Shen Xiang crawled to her feet, I realized the projectile hadn't penetrated the armor. There was a scuff mark, but nothing more.

“A very interesting weapon,” she said. “Could that be... a Duhkha Cannon? My my.”

Itsuki backed farther away from her, and I walked forward, keeping the weapon trained on her.

“It is. And I’m about to test out a few of its functions.” I fired, and a mass of tiny, burning pellets raged toward her. She raised her arm to protect her face, and the pellets peppered her armor, filling the alley with plinking noises. Not a single pellet penetrated the armor. Not that I was surprised. The bone bullet I’d fired moments before had packed far more punch but had also failed to damage the armor.

“You have a Bone diamond?” Shen Xiang said, and I could hear her smiling despite her face being covered in chitinous protection that revealed only her glossy black eyes. “That would be worth betraying everyone for! Even Hei Luoxiang and his friends.”

I mentally commanded the cannon to switch to Bombard mode, causing all three barrels to melt together into one larger barrel. “What friends?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll make you an offer. Let me take your Bone diamond willingly, and I’ll make sure you live through the process.”

“I’ll think about it.” I fired the weapon, causing a round projectile the size of a tennis ball to rocket down the alley and smash into Shen Xiang’s sternum before exploding.

She grunted as she was thrown against the bonecrete alley wall. Chunks of bonecrete scattered to the ground, and a cloud of dust momentarily obscured the area.

“Tell me that got through the armor,” Itsuki said.

Staring into the cloud of slowly dissipating dust, I prepared to fire another round.

“It’ll take a lot more than that to hurt me,” Shen Xiang said as she climbed out of the rubble.

Reaching into Itsuki’s mind again, I said, “I CAN’T FIRE ANYTHING MORE POWERFUL WITHOUT RISKING DAMAGE TO THE SURROUNDINGS. MAYBE KILLING INNOCENTS.”

“WE MIGHT END UP HAVING TO TELEPORT OUT,” he said.

“BE READY.”

“Who gave you that armor?” I asked, not really expecting an answer.

Brushing dust off her shoulders, she said, “Let’s not waste any more time on useless prattle.”

If physical attacks weren't going to do any good, there was one other line of offense available. Closing my eyes, I sent my divine sense toward her mind like a battering ram. It caught her off guard, and I could sense her own divine sense struggling to defend, resulting in her staggering in place and even taking a step back.

"SURRENDER!" I shouted into her head.

Itsuki joined me, pounding at her with his divine sense, forcing her backward another step.

"It's working, Itsuki," I murmured, letting the Duḥkha Cannon shrink down and vanish.

Shen Xiang trembled, clutching the sides of her head with both hands and letting out a growl that rose in pitch until it was a piercing scream. Then her divine sense surged, pushing both of us out of her mind and rushing against us with enough force to shove us backward several paces.

"She's too strong," Itsuki said, pulling out a teleportation disc. I did the same.

However, before either of us could snap the discs, Shen Xiang thrust her hand out, sending out a crescent-shaped wave of invisible force that knocked the discs out of our fingers and shredded them into powder.

"DAMMIT, DO YOU HAVE ANOTHER?" I asked.

"No," he replied.

Chuckling and baring her razor-sharp claws, she said, "You're just now starting to realize you're out of your league?"

Itsuki was right. We were outclassed, outmatched, and out-everything-else-I-could-think-of. I put my hands together in a sign, and a moment later, a burning wall of light rose up to separate us from the grand eldress.

"Go!" I said, turning and breaking into a run. Itsuki joined me, both of us tapping into our Gravitational cultivation bases to bolster our speed beyond ordinary human capabilities.

"A puny Sunrise Rampart?" Shen Xiang shouted, and I glanced over my shoulder to see that she had simply jumped over the barrier. "I'm disappointed."

“Up,” Itsuki said, and he angled toward the wall, using Gravitational lightening abilities to run straight up it. I followed, with the grand eldress picking up speed behind us.

“PLAN?” I asked.

“ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THIS BUILDING THERE’S A PUBLIC SQUARE. I REMEMBER GOING PAST IT ON THE WAY HERE. THERE’S NO WAY SHE’LL TAKE THE FIGHT INTO PUBLIC, WILL SHE?”

“I DON’T KNOW, WILL SHE?”

All of a sudden, an invisible ripple slammed into both of us, destabilizing us and knocking us off the wall. I tumbled down, just barely tapping into my Gravitational root of energy in time to slow my fall. I smacked down hard onto the bonecrete surface of the alley, and stars filled my vision as I struggled to my feet.

The first thing I saw was Shen Xiang holding Itsuki by the hair, twisting his head back so his throat was bare.

“I could just rip your throat out,” she said. “But I’m more interested in seeing how *this* works.”

She held her hand up into a fist, and the chitin suddenly flowed into a long, curving spike, almost like a stinger. Before I could take stock of the situation and think of a plan, she plunged the spike into Itsuki’s side, just below the rib cage.

He screamed, and my heart lurched. There was no way I could lose Itsuki, but how could I get him out of her hands?

She stabbed him again, then a third time, and as he convulsed, she tossed him down in front of her. “Hm, not as impressive as I’d imagined. Oh well.”

Turning toward me, she walked through the trash of the alley, her black eyes locking onto mine. That was when it hit me. There were two spots on her armor that weren’t covered: her eyes. They were black, glittering, and projected terror, but at the same time, they were completely exposed. And there was something about them that seemed soft to me. They weren’t armored, they were her normal, mundane eyes, just filled with inky evil.

Letting her approach, I raised my hands, which were trembling slightly as terror wormed its way into me.

“I give up,” I said, simultaneously reaching into my dimensional pendant and searching for just the right tool. I had lots of firearms, but all were stored properly, without ammunition in the chamber. I realized that was a mistake; in the future I should have guns ready to go at a moment’s notice. I had one of the paliprox mouth sprayers, but there wouldn’t be time to properly prepare it for use.

I would only have a second to make my move, so it would have to be something I could instantly use as a weapon. Bolt cutters? No. A pry bar? It could work.... Then I saw it.

A tactical tomahawk. On one end, it had a razor-sharp edge, and on the other, a long, sharp spike.

I would have one chance.

“There’s nothing to fear,” Shen Xiang said, “unless you fear agonizing pain and death.”

I dropped to my knees in front of her. “Please, I’ll do anything. I’ll work for you. Do whatever you say.”

She laughed and grabbed my hair, claws piercing my scalp as she did. Pulling me up so her face was only a foot from mine, she said, “Giving up that easily?”

“Nope,” I said, summoning the tomahawk and shoving the spike directly into her eye.