# Chapter one

## Prologue of Peace

In the gentle cradle of the Xiangjian Valley, beneath mist-wrapped cliffs and flowering meadows, lay the peaceful village of Zexin—a place forgotten by time, untouched by the chaos of the outer world. Here, generations of common folk had lived in quiet harmony, tilling the earth, telling stories by firelight, and following the rhythm of the seasons. Though the world beyond spoke of sect rivalries, sword masters, and immortality seekers, Zexin remained a sanctuary of mundane simplicity.

Yet deep beneath the soil and within the wind-carried whispers of the valley, a secret stirred—a song of steel from an age before memory.

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Ten-year-old Jian Xue was many things: mischievous, lazy, full of clever retorts, and altogether too fearless for his own good. His lean frame gave him little presence among the stockier village boys, and his weak constitution—ill since birth—meant he often fell behind in games. But he had something they didn’t: wit sharp as a knife and a smile that could charm even the grumpiest elder.

This morning, like most others, began with trouble.

“Jian Xue! You thief!” cried Boqin, a pudgy boy known for hoarding candied nuts. “Give it back!”

Laughter rang through the fields as Jian Xue dashed between stalks of golden millet, the purloined treat clutched in his palm. Three other boys—Boqin’s loyal friends—gave chase, their loud huffs disturbing the gentle morning air.

“You should thank me! Too many sweets make you fat!” Jian Xue called over his shoulder, tongue poking out mockingly.

They chased him all the way to the edge of the Willowstream Ravine, a narrow, winding cut in the earth known for its trickling brook and ancient, vine-covered stones. The ravine marked the end of the village boundary. No one went beyond it casually. Elders whispered of old stories, long-forgotten beasts, and places where even the birds did not sing.

But Jian Xue, cornered and without options, saw only a crevice between two stones—a hidden nook shrouded in moss and shadows.

He dove in.

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The narrow mountain pass twisted like a dragon’s spine through the jagged cliffs outside Zexin Village, carved by time and storm. Jian moved carefully along the cliffside, his fingertips brushing the damp rock, his every step guided by an inexplicable pull—like the wind itself whispered to him.

A sudden gust swept through the trees, rustling the leaves in a pattern almost musical. The mountains hushed. Birds that had sung moments before took flight, and the soft roar of a nearby waterfall faded into an eerie quiet. Jian paused, sensing something... off. His eyes narrowed, scanning the ivy-covered walls. There, behind a dense curtain of moss and shadowed vines, the barest hint of a seam in the rock—a vertical fissure no wider than his palm.

With trembling hands, Jian reached forward and pulled aside the veil of green. Cold air escaped like a long-held breath, scented with ancient earth and something faintly metallic. He pressed his shoulder to the crack and slipped through.

Inside, the world changed.

The passageway was tight, a tunnel of stone slick with condensation. Glowing moss clung to the walls in patches, casting an otherworldly greenish-blue glow that shimmered like stars on water. Each step echoed softly, muffled by age and mystery. It felt like he walked into the lungs of the mountain—each breath heavier, more sacred.

Then it opened.

The tunnel spilled into a chamber vast and unexpected, hidden beneath the mountain’s skin like a secret heart. Stalactites hung like crystalline fangs above, dripping with rhythmic ticks that punctuated the silence. Pools of clear water dotted the uneven floor, reflecting the glowing mosslight and refracting it into soft swirls of color that danced on the cavern walls.

And at the far end—almost deliberately placed—stood a stone dais, weathered by time yet untouched by decay. Spiraling carvings, older than any script Jian had seen, adorned its base. Atop it rested a lone object, wrapped in faded red silk, its edges crusted with dust.

Jian approached, each footfall hushed as if even the cavern respected the silence. As he reached out, a gust of wind brushed past him—not from the entrance, but from within the chamber itself, cold and heavy with memory. The silk rustled faintly, as if stirred by an unseen breath.

Jian stepped closer to the stone dais, heart pounding like a war drum echoing through the vast, quiet cavern.

The chamber’s cool, mineral-laced air clung to his skin, and the soft luminescence from the moss painted shifting green and blue hues across the surfaces like ripples on a moonlit lake. Above him, ancient stalactites wept slowly, their droplets falling into still pools and echoing like distant bells through the sacred hollow.

Atop the dais lay the object—long, heavy, and wrapped tightly in faded crimson cloth, its edges stiff with age. A delicate thread of golden silk spiraled around the wrapping like a binding seal, now partially frayed, its knot fused with the dust of centuries.

Jian reached out. His fingers hovered above it, trembling with anticipation. The moment he touched the cloth, a shiver coursed through his palm and up his arm—cold, yet alive. He slowly unwrapped the fabric, layer by layer, until the object beneath was revealed.

What he found was not a finished blade—but something far stranger.

A jian-shaped slab of black metal, perfectly symmetrical and unnaturally smooth, rested atop the pedestal. It was clearly not a forged sword, yet it bore the unmistakable outline of one—down to the subtle flare at the guard and the slightly tapered blade profile. But there was no sharp edge. No fittings. Just dense, solid Heavenfall Iron, black as obsidian, etched faintly with forgotten glyphs only visible when the light struck it from certain angles.

It gleamed not with polish, but with inherent power—a presence that bent the air around it ever so slightly, distorting reflections in the pools nearby. Jian reached out again and this time let his hand rest upon it.

The moment skin met metal, his breath caught.

A sharp ringing, like the toll of a distant bell beneath the earth, rang through the cave. Wind surged from nowhere, spiraling up from the floor and lifting motes of dust into golden spirals. The black metal pulsed—once—then went still.

His vision blurred.

Fire. Screams. A burning village. A broken sword raised against the sky.

He saw fragments of a battle lost to time, of steel singing in anguish, and of a warrior standing atop a sea of ash with the sky weeping flames. It wasn’t his memory. Yet it reached into the marrow of his bones.

Jian staggered back, gasping, his fingers still tingling from the touch. When he looked again, the glyphs on the metal glowed faintly—not with qi, but something older. Will.

The slab felt impossibly heavy now, though it hadn’t just moments before—as though it now recognized him. Or judged him.

He crouched and laid his hand upon it once more. This time he didn’t resist the pull.

The Heavenfall Iron vibrated subtly beneath his palm, like a slumbering heart stirred from hibernation. His qi stirred in response, curling inward toward his dantian as if drawn by something ancient—something that had long awaited a bearer.

He inhaled sharply. Not words. Not sound. But intent. The metal was… listening.

He closed his eyes and focused.

He saw not a sword—but the potential of one, wrapped in silence and fury. It wasn’t merely forged Heavenfall Iron. It was a Heavenly Relic, shaped like a jian, born from a star that had once fallen in battle. He recognized it now from old stories the village elders had spoken of in hushed voices—of meteors that fell like angry tears from the heavens, leaving behind ore so dense, no mortal hammer could shape it.

Heavenfall Iron. A material said to consume the blood of ten thousand warriors before it awakened.

And it had chosen him.

The cave responded with a low, resonant hum, like the earth itself acknowledging a pact.

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Outside, a breeze picked up through the mountain trees, rustling leaves in a sudden gust. The world had changed, ever so slightly.

Jian rose, the jian-shaped relic wrapped carefully in the crimson cloth once more. His steps were slower now, steadier, as he made his way back through the moss-lit tunnel. The relic’s weight was immense, yet it didn’t burden him—it steadied him, like an anchor tied to purpose.

Behind him, the cavern fell silent once more. The stalactites dripped. The murals faded back into shadow.

But something ancient had stirred.

And it had remembered his name.

The descent from the mountain felt longer than Jian remembered.

His arms ached from the weight of the relic—though not with pain, but a strange, resonant fatigue. As if every step back to the village required passing through veils of memory and destiny. The jian-shaped Heaven-fall Iron lay swaddled tightly in crimson cloth, strapped to his back beneath his faded cloak. Even concealed, it radiated a subtle pressure that pressed against his spine like a slumbering presence.

By the time the mist-shrouded trees gave way to familiar paths and village rooftops, the last hues of twilight had kissed the sky a deep umber. Smoke from cooking fires curled lazily into the air. Lanterns were being lit along the earthen streets, flickering like fireflies as dusk descended.

Zexin Village welcomed him in silence.

The other villagers paid Jian little mind. They were used to his solitary ways, and in the shadow of the sword-sect elders, Jian’s quiet determination had long earned him a respectful distance. He passed by Elder Song’s apothecary, the flicker of herbs drying in the window. He nodded to Old Farmer Liu, who was tethering oxen for the night. And he paused briefly at the shrine near the plum trees, laying a pebble upon the altar as he always did—for his parents.

But tonight, the stillness felt deeper. Sharper. As though the world sensed he was carrying more than just cloth and metal on his back.

Jian slipped into the narrow alley behind his childhood home, a low-tiled building nestled near the east wall of the village. The door creaked as he entered. Inside, dust motes danced in the pale lamplight. He shut the door quietly and knelt beside the stone hearth, where his father’s old chest lay untouched.

He unfastened the wrappings.

The moment the relic touched the floorboards, they groaned beneath its weight. Jian stared at it for a long moment—black, formless, yet shaped like a blade yearning to be born. The crimson cloth had begun to fray further from contact with the ancient metal, its fibers seeming to dissolve like ash.

Jian reached into the corner of the room and pulled aside a loose panel behind a low storage rack. Beneath it lay a narrow crawlspace—the old storm cellar his mother once used to store preserved root vegetables and jars of winter wine. Long since emptied.

With reverent hands, Jian laid the wrapped relic within.

It sank heavily onto the stone, not with a clatter, but a low, vibrating thud. He paused, then covered it with an oiled leather sheet and replaced the wooden slats. When the floor was sealed again, the room felt instantly lighter, as if the oppressive aura had returned to slumber.

He sat back against the wall, breathing quietly in the half-dark.

What was this thing? A jian-shaped relic of Heavenfall Iron… no, something older than even the legends whispered. It had spoken to him. Shown him things.

Jian clenched his fists. His calloused palms bore tiny tremors, remnants of the earlier resonance. He couldn’t go to the village elders. Not yet. If anyone discovered it, they might take it from him. Melt it. Sell it. Or worse—hand it to someone else.

No. It had chosen him.

And when the time came, he would be the one to awaken it fully.

Outside, a breeze stirred the mulberry branches that framed his window. Moonlight crept through the lattice and spilled onto the floor like flowing silver. Somewhere in the village, someone was playing a reed flute—its soft, melancholic notes threading through the night.

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The morning sun filtered through peach blossoms that danced in the warm spring wind, their petals catching light like drifting sparks. The air was full of scent—wood smoke, stewed lotus root, and fresh tilled earth from the nearby paddies. Zexin Village, cradled beneath the low ridgelines and ancient groves, basked in a peace so deep it seemed eternal.

Jian stood at the footbridge over Silverfish Stream, bamboo fishing rod slung lazily over his shoulder, sandals dusted with soil from his short hike down from the foothills. The sound of water burbling over smooth stones calmed him, a rhythm he'd known since he was small.

"Big Brother Jian!" a voice rang out like a silver bell.

He turned just in time to catch Ru’er, his youngest sister, barreling toward him with arms flung open and wildflowers clutched in one fist. Her black braids trailed behind her like ribbons.

“Ru’er,” he said, laughing, kneeling to catch her. “You’re supposed to be helping Mother clean the veranda.”

“I was!” she huffed, burying her face into his shoulder. “But then Uncle Yu said he saw a spirit bird in the peach grove, and I wanted to show it to you!”

Behind her came his older brother, Liang, fifteen years and full of mischief, trailing a wooden sword carved from a mulberry branch.

“She’s lying,” Liang grinned. “She just didn’t want to sweep.”

“I saw a spirit bird!” she insisted, puffing out her cheeks. “It was white and glowing! Honest!”

“Probably a moth,” Jian said with a chuckle, ruffling her hair.

“Jian,” came a gentle call from the house behind them. Their mother, Madam Xiu, stood by the open screen door, flour dust on her sleeves and a warm bun in her hand. “Come eat before it gets cold.”

Inside, the house was filled with familiar sounds: a kettle hissing over the clay stove, the rhythmic thump of their father’s hammer in the backyard forge, Ru’er’s chattering, and the occasional shriek from Liang trying to practice sword forms near the garden and inevitably knocking over clay pots.

They sat cross-legged at the low table, Jian helping himself to steamed buns and sliced lotus root in sesame broth.

“You’ve been training too hard again,” Madam Xiu said softly, pouring him tea. “Your eyes are always tired.

“I need to be ready,” Jian replied. “The sect trial begins in a few months.”

From outside came the muffled clang of hammer on steel. Jian’s father, Master Qiao, the village smith, was reshaping a plow blade. He worked with slow precision, sleeves rolled, forearms gleaming with sweat and age-earned strength.

“He wants you to become a craftsman,” Mother said after a pause. “Not a swordsman.”

“I can be both,” Jian replied, though his voice carried uncertainty.

Just then the door slid open, and a familiar figure stepped in with a half-finished bamboo flute tucked into his belt. Zhou Ping, Jian’s best friend and a fellow disciple, grinned as he brushed sawdust from his tunic.

“I heard someone say buns,” he announced. “Did you save me any?”

“No,” Liang said flatly.

Jian laughed. “Come in, idiot. Mother made too many again.”

The afternoon passed in easy rhythm. Jian and Zhou Ping practiced their forms by the edge of the stream, occasionally tossing rocks at a target log. Liang joined in with youthful gusto, while Ru’er plucked wildflowers and threaded them into her brother’s hair, giggling when he scowled and left them in place.

The smell of charcoal smoke filled the village air as neighbors grilled fish and sticky rice cakes in preparation for the Lantern Festival the next day. Children practiced their dances; the village priest rehearsed the purification chants.

Evening came golden and slow.

As the sky darkened to violet, Jian sat alone on the rooftop, legs folded, watching the first lanterns float into the sky.

Below, his mother was tidying the courtyard. His father stood by the gate, sharpening a chisel, eyes distant. Inside, Ru’er’s soft singing echoed through the thin walls.

Zhou Ping joined him with a wineskin in hand.

“You’re always brooding when it’s beautiful,” Zhou said.

Zhou was silent for a long time. “You’ve changed since that trip into the mountains.”

Jian glanced at him. “Wouldn’t you, if you touched something the world had forgotten?”

Ping shrugged, but his expression turned serious. “Whatever it is you’re carrying, just remember—you’re not alone. You have us. You have this place.”

Jian nodded. “I know. That’s why I’ll protect it.”

That night, Jian lay on his woven mat, staring at the ceiling.

From beneath the floorboards, he could feel it.

The relic—shaped like a sword, forged of Heavenfall Iron—slumbered beneath his home like a buried god. Its presence pulsed faintly, like the heartbeat of something waiting to be born.

Jian closed his eyes.

He could hear Ru’er breathing softly from the next room. Could smell the faint ash of his father’s forge still lingering in his robes. Could taste the broth of his mother’s cooking on the edge of his tongue.

This was his world.

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Morning in Zexin Village broke with the scent of red bean cakes and incense.

Peach blossoms drifted lazily through the air like floating memories, settling over rooftops, courtyards, and even the still surface of Silverfish Stream. The whole village had awoken early, their voices bright with anticipation. Today was Yuanxin, the Lantern Festival—Zexin’s most cherished tradition. It marked the passing of winter’s grip and the hopeful blooming of spring, a festival of joy, remembrance, and light.

Everywhere Jian looked, colors bloomed. Crimson and gold streamers rippled between thatched rooftops, lanterns shaped like dragons, rabbits, and lotus flowers swayed gently from awnings. Children chased each other through the cobbled alleys, clutching paper lanterns with long silk tassels that danced in the wind.

In the town square, Madam Yao, the village seamstress, had set up a stall of silk ribbons embroidered with blessings. Elder Sima, the pot-bellied village poet, stood atop an overturned basket, loudly reciting verses between gulps of rice wine.

"Another year the blossoms fall—

Yet joy remains in Zexin’s call!

Let lanterns fly, let music play,

For spring has chased the cold away!"

A chorus of children cheered and scattered again.

Jian stood in the midst of it all, the bustle and color reflecting in his dark eyes, the edge of a smile tugging at his mouth.

“Brother Jian!” called a familiar voice.

He turned to see Yue’er, the daughter of the herbalist, waving at him. She wore a pale pink robe and had braided jasmine into her hair.

“Are you coming to the floating lantern release?” she asked with hopeful eyes. “You promised you’d light one with me.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” he said with a gentle nod. “But I need to help set up the stage first.”

From behind him, Zhou Ping clapped him on the shoulder. “Forget the stage, you’re late to the dumpling competition. I’ve already eaten three rounds and I still say Old Man Wei’s are better than your mother’s.”

Jian smirked. “Blasphemy. You just want to be invited for another meal.”

The sun climbed higher, and music filled the air—flutes, drums, and the rhythmic beat of dancers’ feet on packed earth. Lantern riddles were posted on long scrolls outside the shrine, and villagers gathered in groups to try and solve them. Laughter came easily today.

As evening approached, the village transformed again.

A thousand lanterns were placed on every surface—under trees, around homes, floating in the stream. Each one bore the wishes and prayers of the villagers: for peace, for harvest, for long life, and sometimes… for love.

Jian’s family gathered near the temple, where a long table had been laid out with offerings of oranges, sweet buns, and incense sticks. His mother lit candles with a serene smile; his father stood tall beside her, arms folded, the flames glinting off the edge of his blacksmith’s apron.

Ru’er clung to Jian’s side with her own lantern, shaped like a little white fox.

“Do you think it’ll fly all the way to the heavens?” she asked.

Jian knelt beside her. “If your wish is strong enough, it just might.”

She nodded solemnly and whispered something into the lantern before clutching his sleeve.

They joined the crowd at the stream’s edge, where the villagers stood with glowing lanterns in their hands. The sky had turned velvet blue, and stars blinked above like watchful spirits.

A hush fell.

Then, on the priest’s signal, the villagers let go.

Dozens of lanterns lifted into the air, their warm golden glow reflecting on the water below. The wind caught them gently, and they rose—first slowly, then soaring—like prayers loosed from the earth.

Jian’s breath caught in his throat.

He stood still, watching, as Ru’er’s little white fox lantern danced upward, higher than the others, its flame flickering like a star born from her hope.

Zhou Ping appeared beside him, holding his own lantern with care.

“What did you wish for?” Jian asked.

“To beat you in swordplay,” Ping said with a grin. “And maybe marry Yue’er.”

Jian laughed. “Both are impossible.”

Ping nudged him. “What about you?”

Jian glanced at his own lantern, unlit in his hands.

“I’ll light mine tomorrow,” he murmured.

Later that night, as the village wound down, a quiet moment arrived.

Jian wandered alone back toward his home, passing lanterns still swaying in trees, their glow casting soft golden shadows on the path.

At the edge of the field, he stopped and looked back.

The whole village shimmered in the dark like a nest of stars fallen to the earth. Smoke from hearths curled into the sky. The laughter of children still echoed faintly. Warm light spilled from open doorways, voices of parents calling their children in.

It was perfect.

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The night had settled fully over Zexin Village. The lanterns had begun to dim one by one, their flames flickering against the midnight wind. Only a few still hung, swaying gently like tired sentries watching over sleeping homes.

Jian sat alone on the old stone bench outside their family home, arms folded across his knees. The air smelled faintly of ash, sweet rice, and plum wine. Above him, stars speckled the sky like forgotten stories waiting to be told.

From within the house came the creak of floorboards. A moment later, his father stepped out—Jian Shou, the village smith, tall and broad-shouldered, with quiet strength in the way he moved and a few silver streaks threading his hair.

He held two steaming cups of tea, and without a word, handed one to Jian before sitting beside him.

They sat in silence for a while, sipping the hot brew as the wind rustled through the peach trees nearby.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Jian Shou finally said, voice low and worn like river-smoothed stone.

Jian stared at the sky. “I was thinking about the lanterns. How high they flew. As if they could leave this place.”

A faint smile touched the corners of his father’s mouth. “That’s what they’re meant to do.”

There was another pause.

“Father,” Jian said softly, “what lies beyond the Zexin Hills? Beyond the mist and the old forest?”

Jian Shou looked out over the dark horizon. “More than you can imagine. To the east, past the rivers and forests, lie the borderlands of Qin—a place where warriors roam in armor and jade scholars walk with blades tucked in scrollcases. To the south, endless seas stretch beneath thunderclouds. To the west, through old ruins and plains, rise the walls of Zhongdu, the great plains of kings and rebellion. And north, in the scorching deserts , they say the wind speaks in the voice of the dead.”

Jian’s eyes widened. “And you’ve seen these places?”

“No,” Jian Shou said. “But I’ve known men who did. In my youth, I wandered a little. Saw the towers of Xiayi in the distance. Slept beneath the Red Pines. I met a man once who claimed to have seen the Eastern Sea, where swords fall from the sky like rain.” He chuckled softly. “But you know how travelers love their stories.”

Jian looked down at the untouched ground between his feet.

“Do you regret staying here?”

His father didn’t answer immediately. He drank slowly, then lowered his cup.

“No. I built a life here. A family. I earned my peace.”

“But don’t you still dream of it? Of seeing more?”

Jian Shou turned to him, studying his son’s face—the curiosity in his eyes, the quiet restlessness already stirring in his chest like wind beneath untested wings.

“You were never meant to stay in this village, Jian.”

Jian looked at him, startled.

His father smiled faintly. “Your mother won’t admit it, but we both knew. The day you first held a sword and asked what it meant to protect someone—I saw it in your eyes. You were already looking beyond the hills.”

A long silence passed between them, heavy with unspoken things.

Jian opened his mouth, then closed it again. The warmth in his chest threatened to break him.

“I’m afraid,” he finally whispered.

“You should be,” his father said. “But don’t let that stop you.”

He stood slowly, patting Jian’s shoulder with a calloused hand. “The world beyond Zexin is vast. Cruel. Beautiful. There are things out there that will test your soul. But whatever happens—remember where you came from. Remember who you are.”

Jian looked up at him, eyes shining in the starlight.

“I will.”

His father nodded, then turned and stepped inside, leaving Jian alone with the wind and the stars.

# Chapter Two

## Ashes Beneath the Lantern Sky

Night still clung to Zexin like silk when the first hoofbeats echoed beyond the hills.

Not the thunder of traveling merchants or the uneven gait of tired hunters—this was something heavier. Rhythmic. Purposeful. Soldiers.

Zexin Village slept, its homes wrapped in quiet and warmth. The last embers of the Lantern Festival still glimmered in the courtyards, red paper shells now blackened at the edges, dancing on breeze-drawn wires.

But the wind was changing.

Above the village, the soft whisper of leaves gave way to a deeper rustling, like breath drawn through clenched teeth. From the western ridge—the one known only to hunters and shepherd boys—came movement. Then silence. Then again, more movement, closer now.

They came clad in smoke.

Figures draped in traveling cloaks and weather-darkened armor slid down the slope like wolves. At the front rode three riders, faces obscured beneath wide-brimmed bamboo hats. Their horses made no sound. The torches they carried burned green—not firelight, but some concoction from the alchemy halls of distant sects. They cast an eerie hue over the forest edge and the sleeping town beyond.

One dismounted. A woman in lacquered armor with the mark of a broken saber stitched on her shoulder. Her voice was cool as frost. “This is the place. Zexin Village.”

Another man stepped forward, gaunt and sharp-eyed, a thin scar across his chin. “Are you sure the relic is here? We've scoured ten towns already.”

The woman pulled from her satchel a wrinkled scroll. Upon it, ink etched symbols—ancient seal scripts mixed with a sketch of a sword embedded in stone. “The trail ends here. The boy passed through the southern pass five days ago. He came home. The Whispering Steel is buried somewhere in this village.”

She rolled the scroll tightly, then glanced to the third figure, silent until now—a tall man with a silver half-mask and eyes like wet ash.

“Fan out,” he said. “We search every home. Wake no one unless necessary. Kill only if resistance is met.”

“And the boy?”

“If he has it, bring him to me.”

He turned toward the valley, the wind lifting the edge of his robe to reveal the insignia stitched near his waist.

A black lotus in a circle of chains.

They advanced.

From the treeline, dozens of shadowed forms broke off into units, each moving with the precision of trained killers. Crossbows, short sabers, smoke pellets. No village guards would stop them.

They slipped into Zexin like a silent tide.

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In the Jian household, all was still.

Jian lay in bed, arms tucked beneath his head, his window open to the night breeze. He hadn’t slept well—dreams of red skies and dancing blades filled his mind, and the words of his father still echoed faintly: “Remember who you are.”

A strange breeze stirred the curtains. A sound, almost like the crunch of footsteps over gravel.

His eyes opened.

He sat up slowly, heart beginning to drum. Something was wrong.

A muffled shout came from somewhere near the well plaza. Then a scream. Short. Cut off mid-breath.

Jian threw the covers aside and crept to the window. What he saw churned his blood cold:

Men in black armor moving through the streets, kicking open doors, dragging villagers from their homes. A bright plume of green fire arced into the sky from a thrown torch, igniting a thatched rooftop.

Smoke bloomed. The scream of a child pierced the dark.

“Mother! Father!” Jian turned, shouting. “Wake up!”

From the inner rooms came startled voices—his mother first, then the heavy tread of his father already grabbing his smith’s hammer. His younger brother, barely ten, peered from behind the curtain, trembling.

Outside, chaos bloomed in red and green.

Jian ran barefoot across the wooden floor, grabbing the sword his father had made him last year—a training blade, but still real steel. He burst into the yard as two masked figures vaulted over the outer wall.

They didn’t speak. One raised a hand, signaling.

Jian’s father met them head-on. His hammer swung wide, catching one of them mid-chest with a bone-crunching thud. The man flew back against the courtyard wall, spine shattering.

The other lunged—dagger aimed low. Jian moved on instinct, sidestepping and driving his sword in with a yell. It struck true, catching the attacker beneath the arm. Blood spilled over his hands.

Jian stared in horror.

He had just killed a man.

There was no time to think. Another group was moving in through the western alley, blades drawn, searching.

“Into the cellar!” his father barked, pulling his wife and younger children behind him. “Jian—stall them!”

“I buried it!” Jian shouted. “The relic—they’re here for it!”

His father looked at him, face darkening. “Then you must lead them away. Now go!”

The village was aflame now.

Roofs collapsed in on themselves as green fire spread unnaturally fast. The square was littered with the fallen—neighbors Jian had grown up with, cut down mid-flee. The festival lanterns, once floating symbols of hope, now burned and crumpled across the dirt paths like dying flowers.

Jian ran through the smoke and cries, leading a small pursuing unit east—toward the edge of the woods. His body moved on instinct, mind racing.

The relic, the sword-like shard, still slumbered deep beneath the hidden tree near the ridge. They mustn’t find it.

Smoke curled like serpents above the treetops, mingling with the shadows that crept in from the hills. The stillness of Zexin’s peaceful evening shattered as the first scream pierced the air. Lanterns from the festival still flickered along the eaves, their soft glow a cruel mockery of the oncoming carnage.

The cloaked men who had arrived earlier, eyes covered in black veils, no longer moved in silence. They surged through the village in waves, each carrying weapons of foreign make—hooked sabers, narrow pikes, and hooked chains that gleamed beneath torchlight. Crimson-robed assassins bore the sigils, ghostly war banners trailing behind them like the memory of ancient wars. But leading them was one figure Jian would never forget, eyes burning like twin furnace.

Jian was at the edge of the main square when it started. A cart overturned beside him, spilling fruits and ceramic wares onto the stones. He ducked instinctively as a bolt of qi-imbued steel exploded through a nearby house, cleaving its wall in two.

“Run!” someone cried.

But Jian could not. Not yet.

He turned toward his family's courtyard.

He ran, heart pounding, weaving through falling beams and bodies crumpled in alleys. The scent of incense from the festival mixed now with blood and burning timber. Screams and steel clashed all around him, and the golden lanterns that had earlier danced like fireflies now burst one by one in showers of sparks.

When Jian burst into his family compound, he found chaos.

His eldest brother Liang held a spear at the gate, already wounded, blood trailing down his arm as he fought two black-cloaked men. Their movements were quick, almost inhuman. Liang looked back once, catching Jian’s eyes.

“Protect mother—GO!”

The gate exploded inward before Jian could move. A flying palm shattered Liang’s guard and sent him crashing into the stone wall, blood arcing across the air. He didn’t rise.

Jian staggered back, choking on grief. “Brother…!”

A voice behind him. “Jian!”

It was his mother standing near the entrance to the family shrine, pulling his younger sister close. His father stepped in front of them, sword drawn, his face grim and lined with years of discipline.

"Take Yu’er and run," his father growled. “Hide the relic!”

Jian stumbled toward them, barely able to speak. “Father, no, I can fight—”

“There’s no time! Do as I say!”

Master Jian Rong turned just as a figure appeared at the shattered gate. His face was a thing of cruelty—handsome but carved with contempt and the thrill of death. His qi made the air ripple, distorting the flames of the burning homes behind him.

He raised a single finger.

In a blur, three crimson chains launched from behind him, wrapping around Master Jian Rong. With a pull of unseen force, they tore his body from the ground and into the air—then slammed him down. Once. Twice. A third time.

Bone cracked. Jian screamed.

The man approached slowly, and his boot crushed a lantern that had fallen on the courtyard stones. He gazed at the dying Jian Qiao, then lifted a long, twisted saber with serrated edges and drove it into his chest without a word.

“NO!” Jian’s voice cracked, wild with horror.

Madam Xia tried to run with yu’er, but one of the cloaked assassins leapt in front of them. She shielded her daughter instinctively. The man’s blade cut clean and fast.

Yu’er fell first.

Her body thudded like a broken doll.

Then Madam Xia screamed—one high, shattered sound—before she too was cut down.

Jian watched it all.

Eyes wide, knees failing him, he fell forward, hands gripping the ground as if trying to root himself to this moment, to keep it from slipping into finality. His tears blurred the world. His heart howled.

From his sleeves, Jian pulled a concealed smoke talisman—one his father had given him just weeks ago.

He activated it.

A sudden burst of dark smoke cloaked the shrine.

Jian grabbed the small box containing the Whispering Steel relic and ran through the shrine’s secret tunnel, buried beneath the ancestral altar. He barely made it inside before a squad of assassins burst in behind him.

He crawled, blood trailing from his arms where debris had cut him. Every breath felt like swallowing fire.

He didn’t look back.

He couldn’t.

❧

By the time Jian emerged at the other end, on a grassy hill above the valley, he turned—and saw everything he had known engulfed in flames.

Zexin Village, the place of his birth, the laughter of its people, the warmth of its evenings, the dreams he had shared beneath the peach blossom trees—all were now cinders.

The wind howled across the valley as if mourning.

Jian knelt there, clutching the relic to his chest.

Tears ran down his soot-covered cheeks

And in that moment, he swore.

Swore on his blood, on the soil of Zexin, and on the steel that now pulsed within his hidden satchel.

“I will remember every face. Every name. I will find you all.”

The flames rose, illuminating his back as he vanished into the forest shadows.

The world behind Jian was collapsing in flames.

Zexin Village—his home, his world—burned in the distance like a funeral pyre for everything he had ever known. Screams still echoed from the direction of the main square, twisted and overlapping with the clash of steel and the thundering footsteps of invaders tearing through the narrow lanes.

Jian’s lungs burned with every breath, his limbs trembling as he ran—through thickets, over moss-slick stones, beneath ancient cedars that loomed like silent mourners above the chaos behind him.

But even in the dense forest shadows, he was not alone.

His breath came in ragged bursts, chest heaving, the pain in his ribs stabbing with each step. Ash and blood streaked his face. He couldn’t stop. He wouldn’t stop.

He just had to run.

A voice shouted behind him—sharp and angry, slicing through the wind like a blade. More figures were coming.

They’d spotted him.

“Over here! He went this way!”

Voices—sharper now, closer.

The sound of boots crunching underbrush. The hiss of qi-imbued movement whipping through the leaves.

They were hunting him.

Jian’s breath caught. He forced his legs to keep moving, feet pounding against the earth in a desperate rhythm. He clutched the box with the Whispering Steel relic to his chest like a lifeline, his other hand pressing against a gash on his side, blood trickling down his ribs in dark streaks.

He broke through a line of thornbushes and found himself at the edge of a cliff path that snaked along the ravine above the Zexin Gorge—an ancient canyon veiled by clouds, with sheer walls that descended into an abyss of mist and mystery.

The stone path was narrow, treacherous. Below, a sea of white fog churned like an ancient slumbering beast.

A voice rang out behind him. “There he is!”

The trees thinned as the forest path rose to a narrow ridgeline overlooking Zexin Gorge—a yawning chasm carved over centuries by wind and water. A thin trail clung to the cliff’s edge, winding precariously over a series of jagged ledges.

Jian stumbled forward.

Jian turned—three pursuers, robed in shadow, were already descending through the trees. One of them drew back a blade.

A streak of energy exploded past Jian’s shoulder, grazing the cliff wall. The shockwave rattled the edge of the path.

The ground crumbled beneath his right foot.

Jian gasped, reaching out—

But there was nothing to hold onto.

The edge gave way.

And he fell.

Air rushed past him in a roar, screaming in his ears. The world turned upside-down—earth, sky, mist, branches—spinning in a kaleidoscope of noise and blur.

Wind howled past his ears, and the world turned into a blur of gray, green, and white. Branches scraped past him as he tumbled down the gorge’s edge, bouncing off rocks and catching brief, painful moments of impact as he descended—until there was nothing but mist, thick and swallowing.

Jian didn’t even have time to scream.

His body smashed through a tangle of high branches, each one cracking or slashing across his skin. The pain barely registered over the shock. The descent continued—deeper, darker. The walls of the gorge rose around him like the gaping throat of a beast.

And then—

impact.

His body hit something hard and uneven. A sharp pain seared through his back and shoulder before darkness slammed over him like a tidal wave.

For a moment, Jian was certain death had claimed him.

Everything stopped.

The wind faded.

The sounds of pursuit vanished.

No light. No movement. Only mist drifting low across the unseen gorge floor.

Jian’s body lay still, sprawled awkwardly over a bed of moss-covered stone. Blood seeped into the earth from a gash across his arm. His face was pale, lips parted slightly.

Unconscious. Breath shallow. Alive—barely.

The Whispering Steel relic remained on his back, untouched, like a cold sentinel watching over him in the growing stillness.

Above, far above, the distant orange glow of Zexin’s destruction still lit the clouds in flickering waves of fire.

But down here in the gorge, all was silent.

All was still.

And Jian—boy of Zexin, orphan of ash—drifted into a darkness so deep, not even dreams could reach him

❧

The world returned slowly.

At first, only the sensation of breath—shallow and cold. Then, a dull ache in his limbs, a ringing in his ears. Jian's body lay motionless at the gorge’s bottom, half-submerged in a thin layer of moss and cold mist.

The sky above had faded to a pale morning gray, barely visible through the sheer cliffs and drifting clouds.

Time had passed. How much, he couldn’t tell.

His chest rose weakly, each breath a reminder that life still clung to him. Pain pulsed through his ribs, his arm throbbed, and dried blood crusted around the gash on his temple. He could not remember how long he'd lain there—or why he had survived.

Then, deep within him, something stirred.

It was faint at first—a warmth beneath his navel. Not external, but interior. Not painful, but unfamiliar. A soft ripple, like water touched by wind. A hum that vibrated faintly in his bones.

Unconsciously, Jian shifted. His hand twitched.

The relic—the jian-shaped piece of Iron wrapped across his back—had cracked slightly during the fall, but something in it was still alive. Something ancient. Something aware.

That subtle warmth began to seep outward, threading through the marrow of his bones, winding around his damaged tendons and torn muscles. The sensation was neither comfortable nor agonizing—just trans-formative, like his very body was being rewritten at the most foundational level.

There was no blinding light. No thunder or divine sign.

Only this steady, subtle reordering—an awakening not of destiny, but of possibility.

Jian’s meridians had always been weak. His affinity for martial training—low, sluggish, almost indifferent. No matter how hard he’d trained, his progress had been limited. But now… as the warmth circled through him, he felt something clear inside, like fog being pushed aside from a quiet lake.

The energy—residual from the relic, perhaps, or the dormant essence of the sword once sealed within it—did not give him power.

It gave him clarity.

Within the pit of his abdomen, that warmth began to coalesce—gathering into a soft sphere of qi. No greater than a pearl in size, it pulsed once, then settled into stillness, becoming his martial vessel.

His body had been slow. Now, it was awakened. His senses had been scattered. Now, they were aligned.

Slowly, Jian opened his eyes.

Above him, the sky was still streaked with smoke from the burning village far above. The wind carried with it the scent of ash and sorrow. But within him, for the first time, there was stillness.

Not peace.

But resolve

He sat up slowly, pain flaring across his back and shoulder, and reached for the wrapped relic beside him. The cloth was soaked, tattered, and dirty, but the sword-shaped metal was unharmed. It no longer felt heavy. It felt… right. As though it belonged beside him now.

No words passed his lips.

# Chapter Three

## Planks of memory

The wind howled between the narrow walls of the gorge.

Jian stood on trembling legs, fingers brushing the cold stone. Behind him, the floor of the ravine stretched back into mist—a desolate, narrow path surrounded by thornbrush, boulders, and silence. Ahead, nothing but sheer walls of gray slate rising hundreds of feet toward a pale sky.

He looked up.

The world he had known—Zexin, his family, his past—was up there. And though it now lay in ruins, his heart dragged him toward it. Not for comfort. Not for hope. But because he refused to leave it behind.

He took a breath.

The walls of the gorge were steep, slick in places, and broken by jutting ledges and jagged roots. No clear trail. No rope. Just stone and bone.

He reached up and took hold.

The first attempt was a failure.

His arms lacked strength, his legs buckled beneath his own weight, and before he could even reach a proper handhold, his foot slipped on gravel and he crashed back down into the mud. His shoulder flared with pain, and he coughed from the winded impact.

He lay there for a moment, eyes stinging, chest heaving.

He clenched his fists and tried again.

The second climb ended barely five feet up. The third reached a small ledge where he clung for dear life, his knuckles white with strain before he slipped and fell, scraping his side against the rock. The fourth, he almost lost consciousness from the effort. His fingers bled. His arms trembled.

Still, Jian rose.

Hours passed. The light above shifted—blue to gray, then dusky pink, and then black. He slept only when his body collapsed, wedged between root and stone in some natural crevice where the wind couldn’t reach.

There were no sounds of life. No birds. No flowing water. Only Jian’s slow breathing, and the stubborn silence of rock.

Each time he failed, he learned.

Where the stone crumbled. Where it held. Which footholds bore his weight. Which would betray him. He mapped the climb in his mind—a brutal path of memory, pain, and persistence.

His body weakened. But something inside him hardened.

He was not climbing to live.

He was climbing because if he didn’t—if he gave up now—then Zexin would have been burned for nothing. His parents would have died for nothing. His siblings, his friends, the lantern festival… all of it would vanish into ash and time.

He could not let that happen.

And so he rose.

One hold at a time. One breath at a time.

Until, the next morning when mist still clung to the jagged cliffs, Jian reached for a broken root, pulled with his remaining strength—and felt air.

Not wind in the gorge.

But the open wind of the mountains above.

He hoisted himself over the edge, collapsing onto the rocky ridge like a man emerging from the depths of death. He lay there a long while, chest pressed to the cold earth, the sky stretching vast and endless above him.

The horizon was no longer the same.

There was no smoke—only distant peaks, streaks of dawnlight, and forests unknown to him.

But behind his closed eyes, the fires of Zexin still burned. He could still hear the screams.

His hands, though raw and broken, curled into fists.

He would carry those flames. He would become the storm that answered them.

When he stood, unsteady but certain, Jian did not look back down into the gorge.

He looked forward.

And began to walk.

Emerging onto the narrow ridge, Jian paused, every muscle trembling from the climb. Dawn’s first light painted the distant hills in pale gold, but where Zexin Village should have nestled, there was only smoke and ruin. He swallowed hard, chest tight as iron.

He began the descent along the winding hunter’s trail, each step bringing him closer to the charred remains of his home. At first, he saw only fallen trees—ancient cedars felled in the inferno. Then the bodies: a tangle of limbs draped over broken carts, a cluster of lantern frames tangled in blackened beams, and the ghostly silhouettes of homes without roofs. The stench of ash and death pressed on his throat.

Jian’s heart pounded. He stumbled into the village’s outer fields, where spring barley had once waved in gentle waves. Now the stalks lay snapped and scorched. He recognized Old Liu’s thatched granary off to his left—its door caved in, the grain inside nothing but charcoal. Around it, the ground was littered with shattered pottery and singed straw.

Fingers aching, he pressed on. Each step echoed memories: laughter from children chasing fireflies here, the clatter of Master Qiao’s hammer in the forge, the murmur of festival song. All were gone, replaced by a deathly hush broken only by distant crackles as smoldering beams shifted. He saw a lone sandal at the well—his sister’s—half-buried in ash. His breath caught as he sank to his knees and scooped it up, cradling the charred leather to his chest.

He rose, eyes stinging, and followed the main path toward the square. There, the bell tower lay collapsed in a ruin of splintered wood and molten metal. Through the gaps, flickering embers still glowed, like dying eyes watching him. Beneath the ruins, the bodies of neighbors—Master Qi the weaver, young Mei the baker’s daughter, even the silent village priest—lay side by side, final lanterns of flesh and bone.

Jian stumbled forward, voice lost, tears carving channels through soot on his cheeks. He sank to the broken stones of the square, pressing a trembling hand against the bell’s shattered tongue. “Mother… Father…” he choked, but the morning wind swallowed his words.

He looked up, saw movement at the edge of his vision, and paused. One last home stood half-intact—the old shrine by the peach trees. He rose and staggered there, breath catching as he glimpsed the charred altar, the empty shrine where his parents had offered incense only nights before.

Jian sank against the blackened wood, shoulders shaking. For long moments, he could not breathe through the grief. The world he’d known was ashes. Hope had been razed. All that remained was this burning promise in his heart: “They will answer for this.”

And so, with tears drying on his cheeks and a single, solemn vow etched into his soul, Jian stood. The path ahead was uncertain, the world beyond his home fraught with danger.

The silence in Zexin Village was unlike any Jian had known.

No blacksmith’s hammer sang from his father’s forge.

No clamor of laughter rose from the rice wine inn.

The peach blossoms that once scattered gently over rooftops were now curled and blackened, their petals charred and scattered like ashes in the wind.

Jian stood amidst the ruin—his clothes stiff with dried blood and soot, arms trembling as he knelt at the center of what was once the village square. There, beneath the gnarled old peach tree where children used to play during festivals, he began to dig.

The first grave he dug was for his father.

The iron shovel—twisted and blackened by fire—bit into the ground with a harsh crunch. Jian’s hands, blistered and raw, gripped the shaft with determination, even as blood seeped into the splinters of the wood. Each shovel of dirt was a weight that pulled memory after memory from the depths of his grief.

He remembered the sound of his father’s voice in the forge:

“Feel the steel, Jian. Don’t rush it. Let it speak to your hands.”

And later, beneath the stars, his father’s steady tone as they spoke of the world beyond Zexin’s hills:

“One day, you’ll leave these mountains. But no matter how far you go, always remember what built your sword—your heart.”

Tears blurred his vision as he pressed the final handfuls of earth over his father’s resting place. He placed a charred plank upright at its head, carving into it with a fragment of bone-hilted steel:

勇 — Courage.

Next came his mother.

Her grave was gentler, as if the earth softened beneath his hands. He remembered the warm scent of her steamed buns, the way she would hum quietly when she worked at the loom, and how her hands always found a way to brush away his pain with a touch.

“Promise me,” she once said, while tending to his bruised knuckles after a training session,

“No matter how strong you become, Jian, keep your heart kind.”

He carved 慈 — Compassion — onto her grave plank.

But it was the next two graves that shattered him.

His sister, Ru’er. Only nine. Bright eyes and wild laughter. She’d insisted on helping him polish his practice sword, even when it nearly toppled her over. Just two nights ago, she’d tied a clumsy red ribbon around his wrist and whispered,

“For luck, when you become the strongest swordsman!”

He found her ribbon—half-burnt—in the rubble. He tied it to the top of her grave.

Then his brother, Jian Liang. fifteen. Ambitious, loud, and always pushing Jian to improve his stances. They used to spar by the edge of the lotus pond, shouting out imaginary sect names and grand techniques.

“If I win, I get the last bun,” he used to say.

“If you win, I let you win.”

Jian carved no words for Liang. Only a small blade—a dagger they'd crafted together—laid across the plank. A silent bond between brothers broken by steel.

The digging went on for hours.

Villager after villager. Faces he knew. Names he could never forget. Ms. Tang who gave him candied plums. Elder Min who taught him calligraphy. Their remains lay scattered across the square, caught in moments of futile resistance. Jian dug until his limbs trembled and the skin on his palms split open, the blood mixing with the ash of his past.

By the end, over twenty crude graves lined the square. For each, he pressed the plank deep into the earth, wiping it down with shaking hands. The last one he shaped was smaller than the rest—a child’s. He did not know her name.

The sun began to rise, casting golden light on the smoke-wreathed ruins. Jian stood amidst the burial mounds, silent, his chest hollow.

A soft wind stirred the air. The scent of scorched wood and blood still lingered, but beneath it… he caught a trace of peach blossoms.

He turned toward the eastern path—toward the hills beyond which lay Tianshui Crossing. The relic on his back pulsed gently, faint warmth pressing against his spine like a heartbeat. There was no home left for him here. Only memory. And resolve.

Jian gave a final bow to each grave. His voice cracked as he whispered a vow not to spirits, but to the dead who gave him everything:

“I wasn’t strong enough to protect you. But I will become the storm that remembers. The blade that avenges.”

The tears didn’t fall anymore. They had all burned away.

He shouldered the relic’s bundle and turned east. His footsteps were heavy, but they carried him forward—across ash and stone, across broken thresholds and scattered remnants of peace—until the charred village faded behind him.

He did not look back.

Somewhere deep within the mountains, beneath a veil of snow-laden pines and jagged black cliffs, a hidden sanctum lay buried in shadow. Its halls were narrow and carved from cold obsidian stone. Flame-lit sconces flickered along the walls, casting faint amber light that did little to soften the sharp silence of the place.

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In a candle-lit chamber at its center, Lan Kui knelt.

His armor, still stained from battle, had not been polished. A dark hood shadowed his expression, but his eyes—narrow, uncertain—lifted toward the figure standing across from him.

The figure was cloaked entirely in black, their face veiled beneath a draping hood of fine silk, the kind worn only by those who feared not death—but recognition. Their voice came low and calm, echoing slightly in the stone chamber.

“So,” the figure said, “you failed to retrieve it.”

Lan Kui bowed his head slightly, jaw clenched. “The boy escaped. We scoured the entire gorge. There was no sign of him.”

The cloaked figure made no gesture of surprise. Instead, a slow exhale followed.

“You should not have allowed sentiment or haste to cloud your strike. One thread left hanging… can unravel a tapestry.”

Lan Kui’s fists tightened over his knees. “We razed the village to the ground. Burned it to ash. Nothing should have survived.”

The hooded figure tilted their head slightly.

“And yet something did.”

A long pause stretched between them.

Lan Kui spoke again, voice edged with restrained concern.

“The sects might investigate. They’re already murmuring about the smoke seen from the outer ridges. If the Valley Masters of Xiangjian or Crimson Root begin asking questions—”

The figure raised a hand. Calm, precise.

“Zexin was nameless. Unregistered. No allegiances. A forgotten pebble on the map of Jianghu. To the outside world… it will be a misfortune. Bandits. A wildfire. Nothing more.”

Lan Kui’s lips tightened, but he did not argue.

The figure stepped forward. Their voice dropped to a near-whisper, as though the walls themselves must not hear.

“The artifact is still out there. You will continue to search. Quietly. No banners. No flames. No loose tongues. Let no whisper of Zexin's end reach the ears of the sect councils.”

A moment passed before Lan Kui asked, hesitating,

“…and if the boy resurfaces?”

The figure’s tone sharpened, cool and final:

“Then you will erase him properly this time. Without fire. Without spectacle. No witnesses. No names.”

With that, the figure turned, their cloak whispering against the stone as they walked toward the rear corridor.

Just before disappearing into shadow, they paused, voice echoing once more:

“A relic like that... has waited long enough. We will not let fate misplace it again.”

Then they vanished into darkness, leaving only silence and a trembling candle.

Lan Kui remained kneeling, breath shallow. The wind howled softly through the vents of the mountain, but even that sound seemed distant here. As the candle flickered beside him, the faint scent of scorched earth returned to his mind.

# Chapter four

## A road of smoke and silence

The morning mist curled around Jian’s feet like forgotten ghosts.

He stood at the edge of the final ridge, where the narrow path from Zexin Village spilled into the unending plains beyond. Behind him, the hills of home—no longer a sanctuary but a scar—lay shrouded in distant smoke and memory. Before him, a world he had never seen stretched to the horizon.

Jian had never set foot outside the boundaries of Zexin. Not truly. The furthest he had traveled was to the border fields where his father once taught him how to sling a bowstring or run barefoot through the terraced rice hills.

Now, those gentle slopes lay behind him like broken pottery, shattered by flame and blood.

He stepped forward.

The earth beneath his feet changed almost immediately. The rich, red-brown soil of his homeland gave way to drier dirt—dusted in the faintest hue of silver. Tall grass swayed in slow rhythm, as if breathing, whispering in a language he didn’t know.

Birds unlike any he had seen chirped high above, their calls sharp and foreign. Strange flowers bloomed along the trail, blue-veined petals unfurling toward a distant sun. Wind no longer smelled of home-cooked rice or mountain rain. Here, it was the wind of the world—carrying stories he couldn’t understand, danger he couldn’t yet name, and people he had never met.

He passed through the Yunru Grasslands, a wide open basin dappled with wildflowers, towering sun-browned stalks, and stone paths cracked by time. The landscape was beautiful—painfully so. With every step, Jian felt the soft soil underfoot and saw scenes that reminded him of how much he had lost.

A dragonfly skimmed past his face. Somewhere in the distance, a herd of cloud-horned deer scattered at his approach. He paused only once to drink from a jade-clear brook, its waters crisp and cold—untainted by ash. But as he looked into the reflection, he barely recognized the boy in the stream.

His cheeks were sunken now, clothes frayed, and eyes—his eyes—had lost that old softness.

He moved on.

Days passed.

The road wound into darker terrain—the Chenzhou Gorge, a place whispered about in old village tales. A deep canyon with sharp black cliffs rising like fangs on either side. Fog rolled in every dusk, veiling the trail and shrouding the cliffs in silence.

Here, Jian walked quietly.

Stone steps descended into the mist. Occasionally he passed shrines long abandoned—statues of forgotten sword saints worn smooth by time and lichen. The air grew colder, and sounds seemed distant, swallowed whole by the mist.

At night, he found shelter in the alcove of a broken temple, nestled beneath its crumbling roof as the wind howled through hollow halls. He dreamt often—of faces in fire, of his father’s voice, of his sister’s smile. And always, he awoke with tears drying on his cheeks and a clenched fist over his chest, where the spiritual orb pulsed faintly within his core.

Each day through the canyon made him feel more like a phantom, walking between worlds—no longer of the village, but not yet of the world beyond.

Until one morning, the path brightened.

The mist thinned. The cliffs softened. And sunlight, golden and vast, spread over the horizon like silk.

Jian stepped out of the canyon into the world of Xiangjian.

It was immense.

Stretching before him were hills upon hills, jade rivers winding through valleys like flowing glass. Terraced farmland quilted the ridges below, where farmers moved like dots among fields. Distant pagodas stood proud on rocky spines. Wind carried scents of incense, wild herbs, smoke, and steel. Somewhere beyond, the faint tolling of a monastery bell reached his ears, like a memory not his own.

Here was the Jianghu world he had only heard about in hushed tales.

And yet, even in its splendor, Jian could feel the cold in it—the indifference. No one knew him here. No one knew what he had lost. The land was beautiful, but it offered no comfort.

He sat on a stone by the path, shoulders heavy. And he remembered.

The planks he had carved. His mother’s bloodied hand. The way his sister had cried, barely audible through the crackling fire. And the way his father had turned to face the intruders, swordless but unyielding.

A lump rose in his throat.

But then—he looked again at the road ahead.

This world… it was larger than he’d ever imagined. Full of strangers, mysteries, and enemies. But also of teachers, secrets, and perhaps, somewhere, the answers to the pain etched into his chest.

But maybe—so too did something else.

He rose. Adjusted the cloth wrapped around his shoulder. And began walking toward Tianshui Crossing, where rumor spoke of a town where swordsmen passed like wind and legends waited behind every inn door.

He did not look back.

The road twisted along a rocky hillside now, rising gently toward a narrow ridge above the vast grasslands. A few scattered clouds drifted across the sun, throwing fleeting shadows over the world below. Jian's footsteps were light but steady, the steady hum of his breath the only sound accompanying him.

Then—he heard it.

Faint at first. Metal ringing. Then a sharp scream.

Jian dropped low behind a cluster of weather-worn stones just off the trail, his eyes narrowing toward the distant commotion. Down in a shallow ravine nestled between two ridgelines, a small caravan was under attack.

He could see the shattered remains of wagons—burning in bursts of oily flame. Crimson-cloaked figures, masked and swift, descended upon a group of guards armed with short sabers and polearms. Their movements were ruthless—unhesitating. A woman's cry pierced the air. Another guard fell, his back slashed open in a single stroke before he even turned to face his attacker.

Jian’s breath caught in his throat.

He wasn’t sure if the bandits were merely highwaymen or affiliated with one of the rogue sects his father once spoke of. Either way, they moved like wolves in formation, attacking with practiced brutality. This wasn’t a duel. It was a massacre.

He watched as a young swordsman, charged at one of the attackers—only to be parried mid-strike and thrown against a jagged boulder, his skull cracking audibly.

Blood spilled on the grass like water.

Jian’s fingers dug into the dirt. His chest tightened. He wanted to move, to shout—to do something. But he couldn’t. He wasn’t strong enough. Instead, he watched, teeth clenched, as one final defender was cut down—his blade knocked from his hand and his throat opened with a single sweep. The cloaked attackers did not linger. Like phantoms, they vanished into the woods beyond the ridge, leaving fire and ruin in their wake.

Silence returned slowly, almost unnaturally.

Jian remained still behind the stones, heart pounding.

He waited until the last ember from the wrecked cart flickered low before moving. He crept down the slope and approached the aftermath, the smell of scorched wood and blood sharp in his nostrils.

He saw faces—some eyes still open in death, others frozen in expressions of terror. The young swordsman who had fought so valiantly now lay with his hand reaching for his blade just inches beyond his grasp. Jian looked at the youth for a long while.

They were the same age.

Same build.

That could’ve been me.

That would be me, he realized—if I step into the world like this… weak, unprepared, dreaming of revenge without the strength to even survive.

He sank to one knee beside the swordsman’s body. Something within him began to change. Something sharp and cold. A steel wire wrapping itself around his heart.

He had cried before. So many times. But here, no tears came.

Only silence.

The world outside Zexin was far grander than he ever imagined. But it was also cruel, indifferent. There were no kind eyes. No warm hearths waiting to welcome him. There was no safety in the jianghu.

He thought of his siblings, his parents.

He thought of the man with the wolfish grin who killed his father.

He rose without a word and turned back to the road. But now, his steps were harder. His eyes sharper. Whatever remnants of his innocence remained, they had died in that field alongside strangers who bled in the same soil he now walked.

He would learn.

He would grow stronger.

He would survive.

Even if it meant becoming a sword of ice, a shadow among men—so be it.

He never looked back again at the field of the dead.

The sun had just begun to dip low, staining the horizon with tones of rose and amber, as Jian descended from the hills and caught his first glimpse of Tianshui Crossing.

The view stopped him in his tracks.

Where the rolling path ended, the earth opened into a wide basin veiled in river mist, cut through by a great stone bridge arching over the dark waters of the Tianshui River. On both banks, buildings sprawled outward—tiled rooftops packed tightly together, strings of banners fluttering in the wind. Laughter echoed from taverns, and vendors shouted over the din to peddle meat buns, lacquered fans, and iron trinkets.

Jian had never seen so many people.

Children chased one another barefoot between carts. Scribes in gray robes argued over scrolls at an open stall. A monk, silent and serene, walked past a man cursing over spilled wine. The scent of roasted chestnuts, grilled eel, and sweet plum cakes drifted through the air.

It was chaos. It was alive.

It was… utterly alien.

His feet carried him forward slowly, step by step, like a ghost among the living. No one gave him a second glance—just another dusty-faced boy with a sword strapped to his back.

He passed under a wood-framed gate painted with the faded characters for “Tianshui Crossing—Front Gate District”, and let himself be pulled along the rhythm of the town.

Hunger gnawed at him now, sharp and real. He spotted a modest inn, its front painted red with flaking gold trim. Lanterns swung above the door. A cracked wooden sign read “The Green Carp Inn.”

He pushed the door open and stepped into warmth and clamor.

Inside, the inn bustled with tired travelers and grumbling merchants. Steam from bowls of soup fogged the air. A squat woman behind the counter shouted orders while wiping her hands on her apron.

Jian slipped into a corner table, his shoulders still tense. He untied the old pouch from his waist—his father's pouch—and quietly counted the coins. A few bronze, and one tarnished silver piece.

This won’t last me more than a day or two, he thought bitterly.

He ordered the cheapest bowl of rice porridge and pickled vegetables he could afford. It arrived lukewarm and thin, but he ate it gratefully.

Around him, the inn buzzed with talk. But Jian heard nothing—until a sharp voice rose from a table beside him.

“—I told you, the Verdant Jade Sect is accepting new disciples. They've opened trials outside Jade Willow Hollow. Got there just yesterday from the south road!”

“And who’s goin’ to join?” a second man snorted. “Not you, old drunkard. That sect only wants the clever, the talented. Sword arms and fast feet!”

“Bah. Talent’s not the only thing they look for. They say their tests change depending on the candidate.”

“Heh. You really think you can be a disciple?”

Jian’s bowl froze halfway to his mouth.

Verdant Jade Sect. Disciples. Trials.

He’d never heard those words spoken with such weight. The tone, the tension, the hunger behind them.

A sect…

What is that?

A school? A place where they teach martial arts?

He had no master now. No village. No guide. But if there were places where one could learn to fight, to grow stronger—he had to try.

Maybe this was it.

He stood quietly, slipped outside, and wandered through the evening haze where the street vendors had begun lighting oil lamps. His eyes darted among the stalls until he spotted an older man selling dumplings beside a steaming brazier.

“Excuse me,” Jian said, bowing slightly.

The vendor glanced up. “You buying?”

“I have a question. Do you know the way to the Verdant Jade Sect?”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Planning to become a disciple, eh? You’re not the first boy today asking that.”

He pointed eastward, beyond the far edge of town where the hills rolled into forest. “Follow the river path east for two days, then turn north when the trail forks near a broken shrine. You’ll find Jade Willow Hollow nestled between the cliffs. That’s where they hold their entrance trials.”

Jian bowed again, deeply. “Thank you.”

The vendor grunted and returned to tending his dumplings.

Jian turned his eyes to the dimming sky. A crescent moon hung above the rooftops, and a wind stirred through the trees beyond the town walls.

He didn’t know what this sect was. He didn’t know what they would ask of him. But it was a path—and paths were meant to be walked.

He adjusted the sword on his back and stepped forward into the deepening dusk.

# Chapter five

## The road to jade willow hollow

The path east of Tianshui Crossing wound like a ribbon of stone between rising hills and whispering woods, bathed in the golden light of morning. Jian walked with steady, quiet steps, his thin cloak tugged by the breeze. With each mile, the world seemed to open wider—broad-leaved trees stretched toward the sky, wildflowers swayed along the roadside, and birds wheeled in the open air like dancing brushstrokes.

Ahead, the hills parted and revealed a long, sloping valley where the river ran silver. And along that road, he was no longer alone.

They came in trickles at first—lone figures trudging the path like him. Then came groups, chatter filling the air, and soon the road was dotted with dozens of young men and women, all walking toward the same destination: Jade Willow Hollow.

Some were clad in flowing robes of emerald and gold, silk threads catching the sun. Their shoes were embroidered, their hair pinned with jade and silver. They moved in tight clusters, heads high, talking loudly, laughing with that effortless superiority bred into wealth.

Others were like Jian—quiet, humble, wrapped in coarse cotton and patched cloaks, the dust of many days clinging to their sandals. They walked alone, their eyes fixed forward, burdened with hunger, hope, and the silence of the poor.

Jian kept to the edges of the road.

He heard snippets of conversation as he passed or was passed.

“I heard Master Huo Ran himself will oversee the trials this year.”

“They say only twenty will be selected. Out of hundreds!”

“Hah. The rabble should save themselves the shame and turn back now.”

Jian looked over his shoulder. The voice had come from a boy with sharp eyes and embroidered cuffs. His group of companions laughed, glancing toward a hunched boy a few paces ahead, shoulders drawn in like a kicked dog.

Jian’s jaw tightened.

In Zexin Village, there had been no rich or poor. No silks, no silked tongues. Everyone ate from the same hearth, trained on the same courtyard stones, shared laughter at the same lantern festival. It had been a world of even hands and simple truths.

But out here?

The world felt cleaved in two.

The poor trudged. The rich glided.

Jian walked beside a girl with shoes stitched from straw. Her robes were no more than dyed linen, and her hands bore cuts, old and new. A few boys in fine cloaks passed by and chuckled as they swept dust in her direction.

She didn’t look up. Neither did Jian. But he clenched his fists.

He was learning.

The Jianghu did not care who you were, only what you could do.

By noon, the road twisted through a ravine of willow trees, their branches trailing over a bubbling brook. A stone milestone ahead bore faint carvings, half-erased by time.

“Three Li to Jade Willow Hollow.”

Jian stepped off the road and leaned against a tree to drink from a water skin. As he rested, he listened.

A few of the wealthier candidates set up small camps on nearby rock shelves. Their servants—yes, they had servants—prepared tea and unpacked bundles of food. Jian's stomach clenched at the smell of honeyed rice cakes.

The commoners had nothing but hardened bread and dry roots. They ate in silence.

The sun dipped lower. Shadows of leaves danced across the earth like ghosts of the past.

Jian stood again. His legs ached. His cloak was stained and heavy with dust. But his eyes burned with resolve.

He didn’t care about silk robes or jade hairpins.

He wasn’t here to make friends.

He wasn’t here to impress.

He was here to become strong enough to kill his enemies.

Strong enough to hunt every monster behind Zexin’s ruin.

Let them laugh. Let them sneer.

He would pass the trial.

The sun had begun to descend past the shoulders of the western cliffs, gilding the dirt road in molten amber. Jian walked in quiet reflection, the breeze lifting the dust off his robes. He was deep in thought—about the sect, the people he’d seen, the chasm between rich and poor—when the sudden sound of thundering hooves shattered the evening calm.

He turned.

A jade-green carriage, ornately carved and gold-trimmed, came barreling down the road, pulled by two sleek spirit horses frothing at the mouth. It moved with no regard for those on the path.

Jian’s eyes widened. He was directly in its path—too close.

“Watch out!”

A body slammed into him from the side, knocking him off his feet. The two of them tumbled into the roadside brush just as the carriage thundered past, kicking up a whirlwind of dust and snapping branches.

Jian lay in the dirt, stunned, heart hammering in his chest.

A short distance ahead, the carriage skidded to a halt.

From its lacquered door stepped a young man dressed in crimson silk hanfu, a pale folding fan clutched lazily in his hand. His hair was bound with a golden thread, his steps slow and oozing arrogance. Several attendants in short robes flanked him like loyal shadows, their faces smirking.

The young noble raised a brow, his eyes sweeping over the two boys still lying amid the grass and weeds.

“Tch,” he muttered. “Peasants don’t know how to stay off the road?”

One of his guards stepped forward with a cruel grin.

“You’ve offended Young Master Shan Ling of the Shan Family. You think your lowly lives matter? You could be beaten to death and no one would even notice.”

Jian rose to a knee, bristling with rage, his palms digging into the earth.

But before he could speak, a sharp boot slammed into his chest, knocking him back to the ground.

Jian grunted in pain as air rushed from his lungs. He looked up at the smug face of the noble youth looming over him, fanning himself casually.

“You looked at me like you mattered,” Shan Ling said coldly. “Dogs shouldn’t have eyes.”

Jian’s blood boiled.

He surged upward—but a hand pressed against his shoulder, stopping him.

The boy who had saved him—slightly shorter, clad in common grey robes—stepped between him and the noble. His head lowered, eyes cast down, but his voice was calm.

“Please forgive us, Young Master Shan. We were careless. It was our fault entirely.”

Jian stared at the boy in disbelief. He opened his mouth to protest, but the boy pressed gently against his chest, signaling him to wait.

“You beg well,” Shan Ling said with a smirk. “Better teach your dumb friend manners before someone slits his throat in a ditch.”

He turned away, his fan snapping closed as he swaggered back toward the carriage. His attendants gave Jian one final mocking glance before following.

As the wheels turned once again and the carriage rolled away, dust settling in their wake, silence returned to the road.

Jian sat up slowly, fists clenched, breathing ragged.

“That bastard—” he began, but the boy who saved him extended a hand.

“Let it go,” the boy said, pulling Jian up. “You’d have died for nothing.”

Jian dusted himself off, glaring in the direction of the disappearing carriage.

The boy smiled lightly, his face tired but kind.

“Name’s Hu Xiao,” he said, wiping dirt from his sleeve. “Looks like we’re both heading to Jade Willow Hollow.”

Jian stared at him for a moment, then finally nodded.

“…Jian.”

Hu Xiao grinned. “Then from here on, Jian, let me give you one piece of advice. In this world, you bow until you’re strong enough to make them kneel.”

The wind tugged at their robes, and ahead, the long road continued winding toward the mountains beyond.

Jian looked down at his palms—scraped, bloodied, trembling with fury.

He would remember Shan Ling’s face.

He would remember the fan, the kick, the smirk.

One day, the world would know not to raise their foot toward him.

The long winding road to the Verdant Jade Sect stretched like a ribbon between the distant peaks, its edges kissed by wandering clouds and crowned by arching willow trees. Jian walked silently alongside Hu Xiao, the boy who had saved him from the carriage incident hours earlier. Though his bruises ached, his mind was sharp, absorbing every word Hu Xiao shared like a sponge touching spring rain.

“You were really about to fight back earlier,” Hu Xiao said with a crooked grin. “But do you even have any sword training?”

“I do,” Jian replied defensively, though his eyes dropped slightly. “I practiced the village’s sword form—basic drills. My father taught me.”

Hu Xiao raised an eyebrow. “Wait… you’re not even at the First Level of Sword Practice, are you?”

Jian’s silence was answer enough.

Hu Xiao groaned and threw his hands in the air. “Brother! You really thought you could take on a Shan Family young master without even stepping into the Sword Initiate Realm?” He shook his head, but there was no mockery in his voice now—just honest disbelief, and maybe a hint of pity.

Jian narrowed his eyes. “Then tell me. What are these… levels?”

The road widened then, giving the two boys space to walk side by side, the rising wind whispering through the leaves like murmurs of an unseen crowd.

Hu Xiao grew serious, his tone shifting as if repeating something passed down through generations.

“ about the sword art levels,” Hu Xiao said, counting on his fingers.

“One, Sword Initiate. Basic strikes, no sword qi. Two, Edge Seeker—control timing, breath. Three, Blade Adept. Internal energy starts to sync. Four: Sword Intent. That’s when you become dangerous. Five, Sword Master. Moves so sharp they’re art. Six, Sword Soul—your blade’s part of your soul, and you can cast sword qi. Seven: Sword Saint. You see enemy strikes before they come. Eight: Sword Sage—environment bends to your aura. Nine: Sword Transcendent—split rivers with a stroke. Ten? Sword Immortal. Sword from will alone. Doesn’t even need a blade.”

“Few ever cross the sixth realm,” Hu Xiao added. “And even fewer have the talent for Sword Intent—that’s what separates a real swordsman from just a skilled fighter.”

Jian listened intently, awestruck. “Who… who’s at the top, then?”

“Well,” Hu Xiao said, placing his hands behind his head, “The sect master, Huo Ran of Verdant Jade Sect, is said to be a Sword Saint. The sect master of Lotus Pavilion, Lady Meilan, also a Saint. But even they bow to Xiao Ruhai—the Master of Sword Valley and the current Valley Master of Xiangjian.”

“That name…” Jian whispered. “Xiao Ruhai…”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“No. Just… something in it feels like the edge of a dream.”

Hu Xiao smiled. “He’s a Sword Sage. Some say he once cleaved a mountain range during the River Sect War with just a single swing. The Five Sects still whisper about it.”

Jian clenched his fists slowly, absorbing each title, each level, each name. His world had widened in a single breath—and it filled him with both awe and a deep longing. He had no level, no title, no technique.

“What about techniques?” Jian asked. “What’s the strongest one?”

“Oh! There’s loads. Whispering Silk Slash—cuts energy but not flesh. Autumn Rain Drizzle—thrusts like rain. Crimson Petal Descent—spin attack, beautiful and deadly. Shadowless Crossing—super fast horizontal cut. Heaven Splitting Edge—massive downward strike. Twin Sparrow Weave—dual sword illusions. Silent Heart Piercer—aims for the soul. Eight Winds Return—redirects attacks. One Sword for Ten Thousand Griefs—that’s a legendary one. Tied to heartbreak. Only used by those with… heavy sorrow.”

“I want to learn the strongest one,” Jian said with unwavering eyes.

Hu Xiao snorted. “Then you’ll have to discover what suits you. No one becomes strong by copying others. The sword finds its wielder.”

Jian looked down at his hands, then to the path ahead, now golden with late sunlight. “All those levels… how does one begin?”

Hu Xiao tapped his shoulder. “By knowing who you are, and what kind of swordsman you want to be.”

He stepped over a rock and kept talking, voice light but sharp with clarity.

“There are many archetypes. Sword cultivators walk different paths depending on their nature and philosophy. Some seek mastery of form, others chase spirit, and some… become monsters with the blade.”

Hu Xiao brightened. “There are five major types: Jian, Dao, Shuangjian, Zhanjian, and Lingjian. Jian is the Gentleman’s Sword—grace and balance. Dao’s for brute force and valor. Shuangjian’s twin blades—fast and chaotic. Zhanjian is raw power, giant swords, smash everything. Lingjian? Flying swords! Remote control!”

Jian listened with real interest now.

“There’s also rare ones: Hidden Blade users, whip-sword freaks, folding scholars with poetry blades…” Hu Xiao’s voice dropped. “One of the most beautiful girls in the sect’s a whip-sword cultivator, rumor has it.”

“Each path,” Hu Xiao said, “is a reflection of the wielder. No two swordsmen are alike.”

Jian nodded, absorbing every word.

“Do you have a path in mind?” Hu Xiao asked.

“I don’t care about the type,” Jian said quietly. “I want the strongest.”

Hu Xiao chuckled. “That’s the dream of every fool who’s ever picked up a sword. But who knows? Maybe you’ll find it.”

Jian looked down at his worn shoes, then back to the road. “Then I’ll keep walking.”

“Good,” Hu Xiao said, his voice warmer now. “But remember—no matter how high the path goes, it starts with your first cut.”

They continued, their steps slow but steady. As they rounded a bend between whispering trees, the gates of Verdant Jade Sect finally came into view.

A wide clearing spread beneath the willows, where stone steps led up to a tall archway carved from ancient greenstone. The arch bore the name:

Verdant Jade Sect — Where Will, Wind, and Sword Are One

Before the gates stood a gathering of youths, dozens if not more—each dressed in all manner of robes and colors. Some were clearly the children of noble families, surrounded by servants and followers. Others stood alone, like Jian and Hu Xiao—clad in plain garb, expressions guarded and sharp.

Jian stepped into the crowd with a strange mix of awe and dread rising in his chest. This was the beginning of his new life. The start of his path toward power, revenge—and the unknown.

Hu Xiao stepped beside him, folding his arms. “Welcome to the real Jianghu, Jian.”

Jian didn’t reply.

He was staring at the massive steps ahead, his fists slowly clenching.

His story was about to begin in earnest.

# Chapter six

## Trials beneath the emerald sky

The morning mist clung to the valley’s skin like a whisper, soft and almost sacred. Beyond the worn cobblestone trail that led to the grand gates of Verdant Jade Sect, a sea of eager youths gathered, their voices hushed as anticipation filled the air.

Jian stood among them, still cloaked in the dust of the road, eyes absorbing everything—his first trial into the wider world. The gates loomed ahead like jade guardians, carved with intertwining vines and swords etched deep into the ancient stone.

Then the wind changed.

It came not with force, but a calm, commanding presence that swept over the gathered crowd like the sudden hush before a thunderclap.

From atop the stairs descending from the sect’s inner sanctum, a figure emerged—neither hurried nor hesitant. She wore robes of white and green silk that shimmered like morning dew kissed by sunlight. Her long black hair was tied in a high ribboned knot, and the jade ornament hanging from her sash chimed faintly with her movements.

Liu Si Yan.

There was no announcement, but her name rippled through the crowd like wildfire. Murmurs began, soft and reverent.

“She’s the Third Blade of Verdant Jade Sect…”

“That’s Liu Si Yan… the prodigy…”

“She mastered the Falling Petal Form by sixteen…”

Jian’s breath caught in his throat. He could feel it—something immense, something beyond the realm of common martial practice. A pressure, subtle yet inescapable, emanated from her like a silent blade drawn. Her presence bent the atmosphere itself, like a mountain veiled behind gauze.

It wasn’t brute strength—it was refinement. Control. Intent honed to its purest edge.

As she passed the crowd, every step felt etched into time itself. The jade insignia on her sash marked her as an inner disciple, but everyone knew she was already far beyond. Her gaze swept across the crowd once, calm and unreadable. It never stopped on any one person… and yet, when it glided past Jian, he felt as though the heavens had brushed against his soul.

Hu Xiao nudged him. “That’s what real sword cultivation looks like,” he whispered. “She's probably already in the Sword Master realm… almost at sword soul level.”

Jian could barely respond. His chest tightened, not with fear, but with a piercing desire. I want to be like that. I want to stand where she stands.

As Liu Si Yan moved toward the training court, her silhouette faded into the mist once more, but Jian’s heart did not return to stillness. Something had ignited in him—an ember that refused to be put out.

The murmurs faded, replaced by solemn silence. The crowd had just witnessed what mastery looked like, and for many, it was a reminder of the gulf between dream and reality.

But for Jian… it was a call.

He looked toward the gates.

I will walk through those gates. No matter the cost.

The crowd had barely settled from the awe of Liu Si Yan’s appearance when she turned back toward them. With a light movement—so effortless it seemed dreamlike—her body began to ascend. Robes flowing like clouds, she rose into the air, hovering above the trial square as if the very wind obeyed her will.

A hush fell over the gathered aspirants. Even the faint birdsong faded into reverence.

When she spoke, her voice was calm and melodic, yet resonated through the courtyard like a bell struck within the soul—clear, carrying, unshakable.

“I am Liu Si Yan, inner disciple of the Verdant Jade Sect and presiding examiner for this entrance trial. Welcome… to the path of the sword.”

The crowd stood spellbound. Jian’s eyes never left her, a growing heat blooming in his chest.

“The way of the sword is not one of ease. It is not given—it is carved, through blood, bone, and will.”

She raised one hand, and from her sleeve floated a thin, unlit incense stick which hovered before her in mid-air.

“The first trial will be a Survival Race through the Greenwood Hollow—once a forest sanctuary, now a proving ground. There, you will be tested not by duel… but by fear, exhaustion, hunger, and danger. Beasts lurk within. Traps. Fog. Confusion.”

The incense stick ignited with a pale green flame, emitting a slow curl of fragrant smoke.

“When this incense burns out, time is up. Those still in the forest by then… will not pass.”

A wave of murmurs swept through the crowd—excitement, dread, disbelief.

Jian’s jaw tightened. A forest filled with danger? I’ve survived worse, he thought—but deep down, he knew this test would be different. This time, I’ll prove something.

Liu Si Yan’s hand moved again, and the incense stick extinguished, vanishing in a wisp of smoke.

“Those who emerge from the Greenwood Hollow in time will undergo the second trial.”

She descended slowly, until her feet touched the ground once more. The pressure in the air remained, as if the very earth waited for her next words.

“The second test will measure your affinity with sword cultivation. Your body will be examined by the elders—specifically, whether you possess any qi meridians strong enough to circulate energy and withstand martial refinement. This is a necessary step for entry into the Verdant Jade Sect.”

A few in the crowd paled at her words. Some clenched fists. Others straightened with resolve.

“Those who pass both trials will become outer disciples of the Verdant Jade Sect. The rest… may return when they are ready. Or never return at all.”

Then she paused, her gaze sweeping the crowd like moonlight across still water.

“The Greenwood Hollow is beyond the north ridge. You will be released in groups at staggered intervals. Do not stray. Do not wait for others. Your sword path begins the moment your foot enters the forest.”

She gave one final nod, then turned and walked away—back into the gates of the sect, her presence lingering like mist that refused to lift.

Jian glanced at Hu Xiao beside him. The fire in his eyes was mirrored in the boy’s.

“Looks like this is where it starts,” Hu Xiao muttered with a sharp grin.

Jian didn’t respond immediately. His gaze was fixed on the ridgeline where the forest awaited. The wind blew softly, and his heart beat like a war drum beneath his ribs.

Survive. Pass. No matter what lies ahead… I will carve my name with my sword.

They crossed the ridge just after noon, a column of fresh faces and beating hearts.

The sun was bright at the crest, but beyond the slope… a different world awaited.

Greenwood Hollow.

❧

The moment Jian’s feet crossed the treeline, he felt it—that shifting breath in the air, like walking into the lungs of something ancient and alive. The forest swallowed sound and scattered light. Thick, canopied leaves filtered the daylight into cold, emerald hues. Every tree stood like a watchman, every branch like a claw poised to snatch.

The soft crunch of his footsteps dulled into silence beneath the damp moss floor. The further in he went, the more he felt eyes upon him. Real or imagined—he could not tell.

Even with the hardship he had endured, Jian’s spine prickled.

“This place…” Hu Xiao whispered beside him, “feels wrong.”

Jian nodded. He could feel it too—the way the trees leaned inward unnaturally, the scent of rotting earth beneath the fragrance of pine. Greenwood Hollow was not a place for life. It was a place that remembered death.

Suddenly, a shriek echoed through the distance—short, strangled, and gone. Then silence again. Even the birds refused to sing here.

They pressed forward cautiously, Jian at point and Hu Xiao at his shoulder. Other aspirants had scattered into the brush, each group determined to make its own way through the maze of trunks and roots.

A faint rustle. A breath of wind. Then something moved.

Snap.

The underbrush to their left writhed—and without warning, a series of long, sinuous vines lashed out like serpents.

One aspirant further ahead let out a shout, but his voice was cut short as a vine coiled around his torso and yanked him off his feet, dragging him into the thicket with terrifying speed. Only the tips of his fingers scraped the dirt before he vanished into the shadows.

Jian froze. Hu Xiao took a step back.

“What in—!”

More vines shot out.

Two lashed toward Jian, but he dove sideways, rolling over a root knot just in time. Another vine coiled toward Hu Xiao’s leg—he jumped, but not fast enough. The vine wrapped his ankle like a noose.

“JIAN!”

Jian spun, drawing the short travel blade from his back. The forest floor blurred as he lunged forward, slashing with all his might. Sparks flew as the edge caught against the sinewy plant—tougher than it looked.

Another vine reached for him, but he rolled again and came up behind Hu Xiao, gripping him by the upper arms and yanking back with raw strength. The vine tightened.

Jian roared and stabbed down into the vine’s base. The third strike bit deep—green fluid spurted out with a hiss, and the vine recoiled with a twitching shudder.

Hu Xiao collapsed to the ground, panting.

Jian pulled him up roughly.

“Can you run?”

Hu Xiao nodded, shaken.

“Y-Yeah…”

They bolted.

Behind them, the vines twisted like the writhing arms of some buried beast, retreating into the earth as if the forest itself had merely been tasting.

Only once they had put several hundred paces behind them did they pause, bent over and breathless.

“What the hell was that?” Hu Xiao muttered.

“I don’t know,” Jian said, catching his breath. “But this forest… it’s not just alive. It’s waiting.”

They looked back the way they came, but the trail was already gone. The Greenwood Hollow had no straight paths. It swallowed direction as easily as it swallowed sound.

A few aspirants screamed somewhere deeper in.

Jian looked to Hu Xiao.

“Stay close. Don’t hesitate.”

Hu Xiao nodded. His earlier confidence was dulled now—replaced with respect for what lay ahead.

Jian turned toward the dense shadowed forest once more. The air grew colder with every step. The trial had only begun—and already, the forest had tried to eat them.

But Jian’s grip on his sword tightened.

Let it come.

❧

The Greenwood Hollow deepened as they pressed onward. The trees thickened into ancient titans, their roots tangled like veins beneath the leaf-drenched earth. Fog rolled low across the forest floor, muffling sound and blurring form. The incense stick tied to Jian’s belt had burned halfway.

Time was running.

But it wasn’t time that now stalked them.

“Do you hear that?” Hu Xiao whispered.

Jian stopped, his breath held still in the hush.

There it was. A low, guttural growl. Not far. Not near. Just present. A warning, not a threat.

They moved faster.

Twigs cracked beneath hurried steps. Mist coiled tighter around their legs. The oppressive forest seemed to lean inward again, the wind rustling like whispers.

Then—a snap of a branch.

And it emerged.

From the fog came a beast of grey and shadow. A wolf—but far larger than any Jian had ever seen. Its shoulders rippled with lean muscle, its fur jagged with streaks of black, its eyes a smoldering amber. It stood at least to Jian’s chest, and its fangs bared like hooked ivory blades.

“W-We need to run,” Hu Xiao stammered.

Jian didn’t argue.

They bolted.

The wolf howled, the sound ripping through the forest with primal fury.

Jian and Hu Xiao leapt over roots, ducked beneath hanging branches, and tore through the mist-veiled woodland. Behind them, the thunder of paws closed with each heartbeat.

Jian’s lungs burned. Hu Xiao’s breath came in gasps. Trees passed in a blur. The incense stick flared on his belt—almost down to the final inch.

Then it happened.

Hu Xiao’s foot caught on a gnarled root. He crashed face-first into the dirt.

“XIAO!”

Jian skidded to a halt, gravel biting into his palms. He turned.

The wolf was close—too close.

Jian's heart pounded against his ribs. Run. That’s what survival dictated. Run and live.

But he didn’t.

His body trembled, his legs frozen with panic and indecision. For a breathless moment, all he saw was the figure of his younger brother—Xiao Tian—once sprawled like this in the fields near Zexin, smiling, tugging Jian’s sleeve.

“I won't leave you!”

The whisper of memory broke the hesitation.

Jian turned and charged back, just as the wolf lunged.

He slammed his shoulder into Hu Xiao’s, rolling them both sideways just as the beast's jaws snapped shut where Hu Xiao’s throat had been.

The wolf wheeled around, growling furiously.

Jian unsheathed his blade, panting.

“Run when I tell you.”

“You’re bleeding!” Hu Xiao cried. Jian glanced down—his left side was torn open, blood seeping from a deep gash where the beast's claws had raked him during the roll.

No time.

The wolf leapt again.

Jian raised the sword—blocked with everything he had. The impact sent him sprawling, but he twisted, slashing the blade across the wolf’s leg. It yelped but did not back off.

It circled.

“You fight one side, I’ll strike the other,” Jian growled. “Ready?”

Hu Xiao nodded shakily, gripping a stone dagger he’d carried since the beginning.

The beast lunged again.

This time, Jian ducked low while Hu Xiao dove in from the side, slashing at its hindleg. The creature roared and twisted. Jian surged upward, driving his blade into the wolf’s shoulder. It thrashed, claws tearing at his side again, but he held on, pushing the sword deeper.

The beast howled once—twice—and then staggered, crumpling with a low snarl and final twitch.

Silence.

Jian collapsed beside it, blood pouring from his side.

“Jian!” Hu Xiao grabbed his shoulder. “Hold on—don’t you dare die!”

Jian chuckled, grimacing from the pain.

“Not planning to… Not until I pass this trial.”

Hu Xiao tore fabric from his outer robe and bound Jian’s wound with clumsy speed.

“Why… why did you come back?” he asked, voice low.

Jian didn’t answer immediately. He stared into the fog beyond, the memory of a burning village and scattered ashes flickering behind his eyes.

“Because if I had left you behind,” he murmured, “I’d stop being someone worth living for.”

Hu Xiao looked at him in silence, then nodded.

Together, wounded and weary, they limped forward—deeper into the forest, toward whatever came next.

And the incense flame burned low.

❧

At the far edge of Greenwood Hollow, where the forest’s gloom gave way to the sunlit rise of a stone terrace, a wide ceremonial platform stood beneath an ancient willow tree. The tree’s branches trailed with strands of pale-green silk that fluttered in the breeze like blessings of the sect’s forebears. This was the threshold—the final checkpoint where the survivors of the forest emerged and where their futures would be determined.

At the heart of the terrace, four elders of the Verdant Jade Sect were seated cross-legged upon a low dais lined with dark jade tiles. Their robes were fine, each bearing the sect’s sigil: a willow leaf within a sword’s ring. Behind them, incense sticks burned in precise intervals upon a copper holder—three already spent, the last one burning down to its final inch.

Elder Shan Liu, the youngest of the four and a man of sharp eyes and impatient temperament, stood pacing before the platform, his boots tapping lightly against the stone.

“They’re taking too long,” he muttered. “How long does it take to run a forest trial? We should have closed the incense already.”

“Patience, Elder Shan,” came a smooth voice from the right. It belonged to Elder Yun Xuan, a woman of gentle demeanor with streaks of silver in her raven hair. “This test is as much about endurance as it is about speed.”

“Endurance?” Shan Liu scoffed. “Some of them come out limping, bitten, torn—what does that prove? And even after surviving that, we still test their spiritual root? We could’ve done that from the start.”

“And risk accepting soft-hearted children who’ve never tasted blood?” Elder Zhen Kuo asked from beside her. “The Greenwood Hollow strips away the illusions. A disciple must know pain. A disciple must know death.”

Across the platform, standing silently near the willow tree’s edge, was Liu Si Yan.

She did not speak. Her long sleeves trailed in the wind, and her gaze was fixed on the forest’s edge, where the final incense stick ticked slowly toward its base. Her presence, like an unsheathed sword, seemed to keep the surrounding space in check.

A cluster of survivors stood at attention below the dais. A few leaned on each other for support, bandaged in places or dirtied by the ordeal. Their eyes flicked between the elders and the incense stick.

Low murmurs passed among them.

“That forest was a death trap…”

“I nearly lost my leg to that beast…”

“What if I fail the next test after surviving all that? Why not test our qi first?”

“Because they want to weed out the weak before wasting time with qi tests,” one youth grunted bitterly.

“Still—risking our lives just to stand in front of them like wounded dogs? The sect has no mercy.”

An older boy snorted. “This is the jianghu. Mercy gets you killed.”

The tension hung thickly.

Back above, Elder Shan Liu folded his arms.

“Let’s hope one or two of them are worth it,” he said. “The last batch was mediocre. We need real potential this year, not another dozen brats with inflated dreams.”

Elder Yun Xuan simply sipped her tea, calm as a pond.

Elder Zhen Kuo’s eyes drifted toward the forest edge. “There’s still time. One or two more might make it out. Sometimes the best ones crawl in just before the flame dies.”

Liu Si Yan’s lips curved almost imperceptibly. Her eyes were still on the trees.

Down below, the incense flame continued its slow death. Smoke curled upward—thin, uncertain.

From deep within the forest, a new shape stirred in the mist.

And the trial was not yet over.

❧

The forest thinned.

Twisted roots gave way to worn stone. The scent of damp moss and blood drifted with every gust of wind. Jian’s breath tore ragged from his lungs as he stumbled forward, his entire body aching, a burning gash marking his side from where the wolf's fangs had torn through his robes.

Beside him, Hu Xiao limped with a clenched jaw, one arm slung uselessly at his side, the other gripping a blood-slicked branch like a walking stick. His face was pale, dusted with flecks of dried blood and sweat.

They had run through bramble, leapt ravines, fought tooth and claw—and survived.

Now, through the trees, the end finally shimmered like a dream: a raised stone platform beneath a weeping willow, the silver strands glistening in the waning sun. Just beyond it, they saw the backs of other aspirants standing in rows, faces turned upward, waiting… watching.

The final incense.

Hu Xiao glanced at it as they neared the clearing—and his face contorted in panic.

“Jian—it’s almost gone! We’re too late!”

Jian didn’t reply. He clenched his jaw and pushed forward. The pain in his side flared like fire, and every step sent fresh jolts through his legs, but he would not stop. He could not. Not now.

Behind them, the Greenwood Hollow loomed—its whispering trees still echoing the memory of growls and blood.

Ahead, the gate of hope beckoned.

They broke into a final sprint—or what resembled one. Jian’s vision blurred, Hu Xiao staggered beside him, and the distance between them and the terrace narrowed—stone by stone, heartbeat by heartbeat.

From the platform, Elder Shan Liu squinted down toward the trees.

“More survivors?” he muttered with a note of surprise. “Just in time to kiss the last ash.”

Liu Si Yan’s gaze flicked toward the forest path, her expression still unreadable.

Jian's legs nearly gave out, but he gritted his teeth and roared inwardly—Just a little more!

The last sliver of the incense curled, its ember like a dying star—glowing, then flickering…

And just as the final breath of smoke rose into the sky, two shadowed figures burst from the forest—bleeding, broken, but standing.

Gasps rippled among the crowd of aspirants.

“They made it!”

“Look at them… what the hell did they fight in there?”

Elder Yun Xuan raised her brow slightly. “They arrive with blood on their bodies and fire in their eyes.”

“One of them’s wounded,” Elder Zhen Kuo murmured. “Still running.”

Jian collapsed to one knee the moment he crossed the boundary. He gasped for breath, head down, blood dripping from his jaw. Hu Xiao fell beside him, wheezing.

For a moment, there was only silence—save for the wind through the willow leaves.

Then came the voice.

Calm. Cold. Clear.

“The incense has not yet gone out.”

Jian lifted his head to see Liu Si Yan standing near the center of the dais, her gaze meeting his.

“You are… within the time.”

Jian’s vision swam—but he heard the words. He clenched his fist.

He had made it.

He and Hu Xiao were in.

The bloodied, dust-caked group of survivors stood in tense rows before the stone dais, their breaths still ragged from the Greenwood Hollow.

The platform now held a solemn air. The elders—four in number—sat in meditation, eyes closed, as the final remnants of the trial incense wisped into the afternoon sky. Liu Si Yan stood a distance behind them, arms folded, her robe swaying gently with the breeze.

Then, Elder Zhen Kuo opened his eyes.

“Those who passed the forest trial, step forward. Now begins the true test: the Sword Affinity Assessment.”

A shiver passed through the gathered aspirants.

Elder Zhen stood and raised a single hand. From his palm, a strand of pale translucent qi flowed forth like a ribbon of mist, curling and flickering in the air.

“Each of you will be tested. If your body produces a qi response in return, you possess potential to tread the sword’s path. If it does not—your journey ends here.”

One by one, the aspirants stepped forward.

The first was a girl with bruises on her arms, trembling slightly.

Zhen Kuo’s hand hovered over her shoulder, and his qi flowed into her.

A pause. Silence.

Then… nothing.

The girl’s body remained inert, unresponsive.

Zhen shook his head.

“No qi response. Next.”

The girl gasped, tears in her eyes, and stumbled back in defeat.

The next aspirant stepped forward—then another. Ripple, flicker, silence. A burst of qi like a gentle mist appeared from one boy, prompting a murmur of approval. Another responded only with a faint waver of light, earning a disappointed sigh from Elder Yun Xuan.

“This year is… lacking,” muttered Elder Shan Liu.

As the procession continued, the hopeful numbers began to dwindle.

Some left quietly. Others were weeping. A few clung to disbelief.

Then it was Hu Xiao’s turn.

He strode forward, his clothes tattered, his lip still split—but his eyes were steady.

Elder Zhen placed a hand upon his shoulder and sent his qi inward.

Instantly, a pulse answered.

A vibrant burst of golden qi erupted from Hu Xiao’s chest like a geyser, rippling outward in a controlled arc. The energy vibrated the air, pushing some dust away from the stone tiles beneath him.

The elders straightened in their seats.

“A powerful response…” murmured Elder Yun. “Very compatible with Zhanjian—the heavy sword style.”

At once, Elder Shan Liu stood, eyes gleaming.

“I’ll take him. This boy has the makings of a true heavy blade practitioner.”

Before the decision could be sealed, Elder Zhen also stepped forward.

“Not so fast. That affinity could suit my school just as well. There’s more to him than strength—he has adaptability too.”

Hu Xiao looked between them, stunned. Jian, from where he stood, watched with wide eyes.

He’s being fought over…

“He could be shaped into something exceptional,” said Elder Shan firmly.

“Then let him decide,” Elder Zhen countered.

The two stared at each other for a moment—before the breeze shifted.

A stillness fell.

Every elder turned, and the aspirants, one by one, fell silent as a figure approached from the distance.

He walked with no sound, yet the air around him stilled as if listening.

His robe was of deep jade trimmed in cloud-silver, his long black hair tied in a simple thread behind him. Though he bore no weapon, every step he took radiated the pressure of a man who had drawn countless blades in his life.

“The Sect Master,” someone whispered.

Jian felt a tremor in his chest. There was no energy flaring from this man—no need. His very presence was sword-like: still, but capable of cutting mountains.

He stopped at the dais, glancing once at Hu Xiao, then the elders.

“Enough.” His voice was calm, but final. “The boy will be placed in the Outer Sect. Let his potential show in action. Only then will the sword choose him.”

The elders bowed. Neither protested.

Hu Xiao exhaled, stepping back with a low bow of respect. Jian reached out and clasped his shoulder as he passed, eyes full of awe.

“You didn’t tell me you’d explode like that,” Jian muttered with a crooked smile.

“I didn’t know either,” Hu Xiao grinned, then winced. “But now I think I’m scared.”

Jian nodded. Now it’s my turn.

And he stepped forward.

The platform fell silent again as Jian stepped forward.

His gait was firm, but inside, his heart quaked like a leaf in winter wind.

He stood where Hu Xiao had stood moments before, but the air felt colder now. His limbs were heavy. The blood drying along his arm where the wolf had struck him itched, but he ignored it.

Elder Zhen approached, eyes neutral. The same as he had done with the others, he placed a steady hand on Jian’s shoulder.

“Ready?”

Jian gave a silent nod, fists clenched tight.

The elder’s qi flowed—silken, controlled—seeping into Jian’s body like a soft breath through a reed flute.

Jian waited.

His thoughts screamed:

Now… something… please!

He willed every cell in his body to respond.

But there was no warmth.

No burst.

No ripple.

Nothing.

The elder’s hand lingered a second longer, as if to test again—just in case.

Still, silence.

A subtle exhale escaped Elder Zhen’s lips.

“No qi response,” he said calmly. “He cannot cultivate the sword path. Next.”

Jian blinked. The words felt like distant thunder.

They didn’t make sense.

“Wait…”

He stepped forward, half a motion, voice cracking.

“Test me again—maybe I wasn’t ready—”

“That is not how this works,” said Elder Shan, almost with pity.

The other aspirants murmured behind him. A few smirked. One scoffed.

Even Hu Xiao looked dumbfounded, taking a step forward—but he was quickly stopped by an elder’s gesture.

Liu Si Yan, still standing apart, frowned faintly. Her eyes narrowed, unreadable.

She had seen the fight in the forest. Seen the scar along Jian’s ribs. The way he had lifted Hu Xiao to safety.

He did not feel like someone without potential.

But she said nothing.

Jian stood frozen. The emptiness he had tried so hard to suppress—the weight of his grief, the fire that had driven him, the corpses he had buried, the promise he had made—collapsed into a leaden void in his chest.

“Leave the platform,” said Elder Zhen, his voice now firmer. “The trial is over for you.”

Jian didn’t remember walking. Only that suddenly, he was at the bottom of the stairs.

Hu Xiao broke through the line to reach him.

“I—I thought you’d pass,” he said breathlessly. “You—you carried me—fought the wolf—how could you not have—”

“I don’t know,” Jian said softly.

He looked up at the platform, where the others stood—tired, hopeful, accepted. Then back to Hu Xiao, whose eyes were filled with both sympathy and confusion.

“Seems I wasn’t meant for it.”

He forced a crooked smile, but it cracked halfway through.

Hu Xiao opened his mouth to speak—but Jian raised a hand.

“No. Don’t apologize. Don’t feel sorry. You passed—you deserve it. I’ll find my own way.”

There was a long pause between them, quiet as leaves rustling in memory.

“We’ll meet again,” Jian said finally. “Somewhere ahead. You’ll see.”

They clasped forearms. A firm, silent oath.

Then Jian turned his back on the sect gates, the elders, and the gathered crowd.

The road leading from Greenwood Hollow bent eastward, into the hills and shadowed woods.

He walked slowly, then faster.

Toward the unknown.

Toward anything that would give him a second chance.

Behind him, the platform faded from view. Ahead—nothing but the wind and the sound of his own footsteps.

And in his chest, a quiet ember, still clinging to warmth.

He had not been chosen.

So he would choose himself.

# Chapter seven

## Ashes in the wind

The wind stirred gently over the crest of the ridge.

A lone figure walked its length, silent as shadow—torn boots cracked and raw, steps sluggish with fatigue. Jian carried the clumped bundle of iron—Whispering Steel wrapped in coarse, weathered cloth—strapped tightly across his back. In one hand he held the old rusty blade from his home, dull and chipped from the trials in Greenwood Hollow. His robes were torn, his body bloodied and bruised, his right shoulder still aching from the wolf’s fangs.

But his mind... his mind was louder than ever.

He didn’t know where he was going.

The road wound through the edge of wooded hills, then faded into open fields. He passed no signs, no markers. Just sky and silence and the occasional trill of far-off birds. His feet moved without aim—forward was the only direction left.

Why me?

The question rang in him, deeper than the wounds on his flesh.

Why no qi? Why no chance?

The memory of the elder’s hand on his shoulder still lingered like frostbite.

He had fought to survive in the forest. Saved someone. Endured pain and fear. Was that not enough?

He thought of Hu Xiao—of the look in his eyes as the bright burst of sword qi flared from his body.

And then... Jian’s own emptiness.

I am nothing in this world, he thought bitterly.

But the ache in his chest was not just shame. Beneath it… something else stirred. Something darker. Something older.

Hatred.

He thought of Zexin.

His mother’s trembling hand as she reached for him.

His father’s last cry.

His sister’s silent, lifeless face.

The flames. The smoke. The man with the fox-like eyes.

He gripped the rusty sword tighter.

Even if I’m nothing… I will kill him. Even if it kills me.

The relic clumped in cloth shifted on his back with each step. The weight of it seemed heavier now. Whispering Steel—if that’s what it truly was—had done nothing during the trials. It had not awakened. It had not spoken. It had not protected him.

What are you?

He remembered the moment in the gorge—the spiraling fall, the stillness of death, the light that seeped into him, silent and strange.

Had that changed him?

If so, why could he not feel it now?

Was it really a gift? Or a curse I’ve carried since that night?

He walked on, further into the haze of the valley's western reach. The terrain dipped and curved. His legs wobbled beneath him, strength waning.

Every breath grew heavier. The fire in his side pulsed with each heartbeat, his wounds reopening.

His vision blurred. The sky bent into a smear of grey and gold.

Then suddenly—his knees buckled.

He fell hard against the dirt path, cheek pressed to warm stone, the rusty sword clattering beside him.

The world tilted.

His thoughts scattered.

And just before darkness claimed him—

A final thought flared like a coal in his mind.

I must survive… I must become stronger…

Then—nothing.

Just wind brushing past the tall grass, and the sound of steel breathing beneath its cloth, quiet as falling ash.

❧

The scent of herbs lingered in the air—bitter and earthy, with faint notes of dried plum and smoke.

Jian stirred.

The softness beneath him felt strange after nights on the forest floor and mountain paths. A mat. A blanket, patched and worn but warm. Thin sunlight filtered through the wooden slats of a small window, casting bars of gold across the walls.

His eyes opened slowly.

He was in a room—simple, humble. A wooden beam ceiling above. Shelves lined with clay pots, bundles of dried plants hanging from hooks. The whisper of boiling water somewhere beyond.

And then—movement.

“Ah! You’re awake!” came a relieved voice.

Jian turned his head.

An old woman was already approaching from the doorway, a wooden bowl in hand, steam rising from its contents. Her back was stooped, but her smile was wide, framed by lines etched deep into her cheeks like a life well-worn by time.

She set the bowl down beside him and took his hand gently, feeling his wrist with practiced fingers.

“I thought you might sleep another day or two. You're stronger than I guessed.”

Jian opened his mouth to speak, but only a rasp came out.

The woman chuckled softly. “Don’t try to talk yet. Drink this.”

She helped him sit up with surprising strength and passed the warm bowl into his hands. The bitter aroma filled his nose. Jian hesitated, but met her eyes. They were kind—soft as autumn leaves.

He drank.

It was awful. Thick and foul-tasting. But it was also warm. Soothing.

She gave a satisfied nod. “That’ll chase the fever and mend the bruises.”

Jian wiped his lips and finally found his voice. “Thank you… Granny.”

The old woman’s eyes lit up. “Granny Ruomu, that’s what they call me. And you, young man?”

“…Jian.”

“Jian.” She smiled. “A strong name. It suits you.”

He bowed his head slightly. “Where… am I?”

“The outskirts of Tianlu Town,” Granny Ruomu said, reaching for a small rag to wipe his hands. “I found you collapsed near the stone marker by the old ox path. I was returning from the market with my granddaughter—Yun Rou. She saw you first. Said you looked like a wounded bird dropped from the sky.”

She chuckled again, though there was a faint sadness behind it.

“You were bleeding. Badly. Burned with fever. I couldn’t just leave you. We brought you back here and I treated you as best I could.”

Jian’s throat tightened. He gripped the bowl.

“Thank you,” he said again, quieter now. The words felt too small for what he meant.

Granny Ruomu waved her hand. “No need for all that. You stay as long as you need. Rest. Heal.”

Days passed like rain over stone—quietly, slowly.

Jian remained in the modest home, nestled beside a vegetable garden and a broken fence at the edge of Tianlu’s outer farmlands. He helped Granny Ruomu sweep the porch and gather firewood. He washed herbs. Fed the chickens. Each day, the pain in his side lessened. Each night, he lay beneath the low roof and stared at the beams, wondering what would come next.

He met Yun Rou, a bright-eyed girl perhaps thirteen, sharp-witted and cheerful despite her plain clothes and quiet life. She had a small birthmark by her jaw and a quick tongue that reminded Jian—painfully—of his sister.

Yun Rou loved to talk.

One afternoon while sorting herbs, she asked, “Are you a swordsman?”

Jian paused. “Not yet.”

She nodded as if that made sense. “You have that look. Quiet. Angry.”

He didn’t respond, so she continued, undeterred.

“I want to be a healer like Granny. But not just any healer—I want to join Medicine Valley one day!”

“Medicine Valley?”

“You don’t know it?” Her eyes widened. “It’s one of the five great sects of Xiangjian Valley. Master Bai Suyuan leads it. He’s legendary! They say he once healed a man whose heart had stopped for an entire hour!”

Jian raised a brow. “Is that even possible?”

Yun Rou giggled. “With him? Anything’s possible.”

He found himself smiling, faintly.

As the days passed, Jian found a strange stillness within himself. The ache of failure from the Verdant Jade Sect lingered, but the rhythm of healing, of simple tasks, dulled the sting. For the first time in weeks, he slept without fear.

But even peace has a clock ticking behind it.

One morning, as mist rose across the edge of the field and the dew clung to the porch, Jian stood alone outside Granny Ruomu’s house.

He stretched, tested his limbs. No more pain. No more fever.

He was healed.

Behind him, the bundled Whispering Steel rested in its cloth—still silent. Still unreadable.

He looked toward the distant outline of Tianlu Town proper, the roofs just visible beyond the hills.

The world waited.

The next step would be his.

❧

Morning sunlight shimmered across the fields as Jian stood before Granny Ruomu’s house for the final time.

The bundled iron relic—Whispering Steel—was slung over his back, wrapped tightly in layers of cloth. At his waist, the rust-bitten sword he had clung to since Zexin Village still hung, weathered but constant.

Granny Ruomu cupped his face briefly, as if he were her own grandson, then gave a warm smile. Yun Rou, her arms folded stubbornly, gave him an extra bundle of dried herbs and glared.

“You better not fall sick again,” she muttered. “And don’t forget—Medicine Valley, I’ll be there one day!”

Jian knelt to her level and nodded solemnly. “I’ll look for your name when I hear of great healers.”

“You’d better,” she huffed, cheeks puffed.

He bowed deeply to both of them, gratitude etched into the movement, and turned toward the horizon. Behind him, Granny Ruomu’s voice rang out one last time.

“Follow your feet, boy. Wherever they take you—listen well.”

Tianlu Town rose like a stone forest as Jian descended the sloping hills toward it. It was unlike anything he had known.

Bustling, loud, colorful, alive.

Crowds surged through wide stone-paved streets. Children dashed past in layered robes. Merchants called out prices from under silk canopies. Perfume, roasted chestnuts, steamed buns, horses, the clang of a blacksmith’s hammer—Jian's senses spun under the sheer volume of it all.

He stood at the town gate like a wanderer from another age, quietly stunned.

It was larger than Tianshui Crossing—grander, more layered. Towering walls flanked the outer perimeter, and multi-tiered buildings with curved tiled roofs loomed at every turn. Banners of sects, guilds, and merchant pavilions fluttered overhead in a breeze that smelled of incense and industry.

He felt small.

Still, his stomach growled—pulling him back to reality.

Clutching the small coin pouch Granny Ruomu had pressed into his hand, Jian entered a narrow side street where the scent of broth curled like a hand around his hunger. A small inn rested at the edge of a quiet corner. Faded but clean, with a low hanging sign that read: “Three Petal Inn.”

The interior was dim and warm, a steady hum of conversation surrounding wooden tables. He took a corner seat and ordered a bowl of beef noodles with preserved radish and tea. When the food arrived, he bowed slightly to the innkeeper and ate slowly, savoring every bite.

Just as he set his cup down, a figure approached.

A tall young man, perhaps two or three years older than Jian, with short-cut hair, dressed in simple but finely-stitched robes of navy and grey. A sheathed sword hung at his waist.

“Mind if I sit?” he asked, already pulling out the stool.

Jian narrowed his eyes but said nothing.

The stranger’s eyes flicked to the cloth-wrapped item leaning against Jian’s seat.

“That… looks heavy.”

Jian didn’t answer.

With a half-smile, the young man leaned forward, curiosity plain in his face. He reached a hand toward the cloth bundle. “Just a peek—”

His fingers barely brushed it.

A faint pulse. Like lightning.

The young man winced and yanked his hand back with a hiss. “Tch! What in the—?”

Jian raised a brow.

“You’re not carrying just any old iron, are you?” The young man laughed lightly, rubbing his fingers. “That thing is alive.”

“You shouldn’t touch what isn’t yours,” Jian muttered quietly.

The young man leaned back, hand raised in mock surrender. “Fair enough.

“Bai Qingsong. From Sword Valley.”

Jian blinked. The name struck something inside him—Sword Valley.

His mind flashed to Hu Xiao’s stories of the five sects. To the name Xiao Ruhai, the Valley Master and peerless Sword Sage. The idea of legendary swords and divine metal.

“I’m Jian.”

Qingsong tilted his head. “That’s all?”

“That’s enough.”

The young man chuckled. “Fair enough.”

They ate together, and soon Jian asked, unable to hold back, “Sword Valley... is that one of the five major sects of Xiangjian?”

“Exactly,” Qingsong nodded. “Unlike the other sects, though, we don’t teach martial arts.”

Jian stiffened. “You don’t?”

“No. Sword Valley’s legacy lies in forging, not fighting. We’re the creators of some of the finest blades this world has ever known.”

“What kind of blades?”

He leaned in, lowering his voice dramatically. “Ever heard of the Ten Supreme Swords?”

Jian shook his head.

Qingsong smiled wider. “Then you’ve got much to learn.”

He raised one finger for each name:

“Cloud Veil Sword—sharp enough to split a falling raindrop midair. Once wielded by the Wind Whisperer of Fengxi Peak.

Jade Howl Sword—known for its resonance. They say it sings when danger approaches.

Thousand Regrets Sword—a cursed blade. Each soul it takes, it remembers. Those who wield it slowly go mad.

Moonshadow Fang—forged in secret by a blind smith in the north. It reflects no light, cuts without sound.

Crane of Silence—a blade that allows the user to vanish completely when sheathed.

Frostchant Sword—freezes blood on contact. Said to be sleeping somewhere in the icebound isles.

Iron Lotus Sword—a radiant sword that blooms with fire. No sheath has ever held it for long.

Broken Horizon Sword—shatters qi barriers. It broke the gate of the Nine Heavens Monastery in a single stroke.

Dreampiercer Sword—made of mirror-steel. It can sever illusions and mind techniques.

Cinnabar Bloom Sword—a demonic blade with a blood pact. It blooms with a red flower after every kill.”

He lowered his hands and drank from his cup.

Jian sat stunned.

Bai Qingsong pushed his empty bowl aside, reached into his sleeve, and dropped a few copper taels onto the table.

“My treat,” he said casually, then stood and stretched his arms behind his back. “Come on, I’ll walk with you a while.”

Jian hesitated for a moment before gathering his things—the rusty sword strapped at his back and the cloth-wrapped lump of Heavenfall Iron. He slung it over his shoulder.

As they stepped out into the midday bustle of Tianlu Town, Jian turned to him. “I want to go to Sword Valley.”

Qingsong blinked, a little amused. “That eager, huh?”

Jian nodded. “I have nowhere else to go.”

A brief silence passed between them as they moved through the winding streets, sidestepping baskets of fruit, carts of ironware, and hawkers shouting prices from shaded stalls. The sound of life was everywhere, yet Jian’s voice was quiet but resolute.

“I don’t have qi,” he said plainly. “I couldn’t even pass the affinity test. The elders said there was nothing in me worth cultivating.”

Qingsong glanced at him, noting the weight of those words. “That explains a few things…”

He folded his arms as they passed under a hanging sign carved with the character for “Steel.”

“You should know—Sword Valley doesn’t teach swordplay. No martial techniques, no flashing forms or duels in the courtyard. Only heat, hammer, and steel.”

“I know,” Jian said, eyes steady. “But it’s something. If I can’t be a swordsman… maybe I can make the swords they wield.”

Qingsong stopped walking.

For a moment, he just studied the younger boy beside him, the sun catching faint smudges of dried blood on Jian’s robes, the exhaustion in his eyes, and the cloth-wrapped bundle that shimmered faintly with something otherworldly beneath the surface.

“You’re serious.”

Jian nodded again.

Qingsong grinned. “Then you’re coming with me.”

They turned eastward, leaving the merchant-filled streets behind, and began walking along a winding stone path that led out of Tianlu proper, toward the jagged silhouette of the mountains in the distance.

# Chapter eight

## The valley of swords

The road narrowed between looming cliffs, the sky overhead streaked in ash-gray from the constant trails of forge smoke that rose beyond the horizon. Jian followed Qingsong in silence, still cradling the bundled Heavenfall Iron under one arm and the rusty blade strapped to his back. He had slept little the previous night, his mind restless with thoughts of qi, of failure, of fire.

But as they rounded a final bend in the mountain path, Jian stopped in his tracks.

Before them, carved into the base of two opposing cliffs like a hidden sanctum, stood Sword Valley.

The massive gate loomed high, not ornate but commanding—two towering slabs of black stone etched with winding sword patterns, worn by generations of wind, steel, and time. At its center, a single carved inscription radiated subtle intent:

“Skill is forged, not inherited.”

Jian felt it then, not the sweeping grandeur of the Verdant Jade Sect, but something heavier—more honest. An aura of work, of fire and metal and pain and patience. It wasn't adorned in flowery calligraphy or spiritual tapestries. It was raw. Real.

As they stepped past the gates, Jian could feel it all around him.

Inside, the valley opened wide—nestled between cliffs and laced with walkways of smooth stone, shadowed under massive tiled roofs and steel-built watchtowers. At the very heart of the valley lay a collection of fires that never died.

“The forge fires,” Qingsong said with pride. “They’ve been burning for over three hundred years.”

The clang of hammers struck the air like a heartbeat. Everywhere Jian looked, people were at work—some hauling metal, others polishing blades, still others meditating before cold steel with closed eyes and bare hands.

No shouting. No arrogance. Just the rhythm of purpose.

Qingsong motioned for Jian to follow.

“I’ll give you the tour.”

They turned a corner and arrived at a solemn hill fenced in by simple stone pillars. It was quiet here. The air still. Jian felt a strange chill crawl up his spine.

“This is the Sword Grave,” Qingsong said, his voice dropping.

Rows upon rows of blades—rusted, cracked, gleaming, crooked, pristine—stood buried half-deep into the earth, like a field of forgotten warriors. Some vibrated faintly, others stood deathly still. Their auras were unmistakable, many scarred by years of battle.

“When a swordsman of our valley dies,” Qingsong explained, “their sword returns. Even if it’s far across the martial world. If they forged it here, it finds its way back.”

Jian’s eyes widened. “It just… flies back?”

“It follows the intent left in it. They say some swords weep at night here. Others challenge new arrivals. Don’t stare too long.”

Jian swallowed.

They moved on, winding past a heavy, smoke-laced avenue where the clamor grew louder.

The Forge Quarter was a sea of fire.

Hundreds of forges, each one unique, blazed in stone pits or on open anvils. Apprentices pumped bellows, masters shaped glowing metal, and the air shimmered with a force so raw it made Jian's skin prickle. Sparks filled the air like fireflies at dusk.

“These are the outer disciple forges. You’ll probably start in one of those over there,” Qingsong gestured toward a lower tier near a small smelting pool. “Each forge has its own rhythm. You’ll learn yours soon enough.”

Jian nodded, the heat pressing into his skin—but he didn’t flinch. Something in the roar of the flame stirred his soul. He felt closer to purpose than he had in days.

Next, they entered a long, echoing hall supported by pillars carved in the likeness of swords, their tips embedded into the stone floor.

“This,” Qingsong said with reverence, “is the Sword Hall.”

Rows upon rows of weapons—displayed on stands, encased in qi-sealed glass, or hovering midair—filled the room like a museum of power. Each sword bore a plaque: its name, its maker, its legacy. Jian instinctively stepped back from one that pulsed sharply as he neared it.

“You feel that?” Qingsong asked.

Jian nodded, gripping his rusty sword.

“Some of these blades haven’t found their owners yet. They wait. And when the right one comes, they’ll sing.”

Jian stared at a long white sword with threads of silver running down its edge, its aura sharp and clear like moonlight. The plaque read:

Moonshadow Fang — Forged by Xiao Ruhai. Wielded by Sect Leader Liu Feiyan in the Battle of Lake Xu.

Jian recognized the name—Moonshadow Fang, one of the ten swords Qingsong had spoken of in the inn. He stepped back in awe.

“She forged that?” Jian asked.

Qingsong grinned. “No. Our Valley Master forged it. Xiao Ruhai.”

Jian stood silent for a long moment.

A man who forged legends.

The Meeting Hall stood like a fortress of the ages.

As Jian and Qingsong approached, the towering dragon-forged doors loomed above them, each one easily ten times Jian’s height. Etched across their face were scenes from Sword Valley’s long history—great smiths hammering under lightning storms, blades piercing mountains, swords clashing against beasts and tyrants. The weight of legacy radiated from the walls, each breath of wind carrying whispers of the past.

Qingsong stepped forward and pressed his palm into a rune-shaped depression at the side of the door.

With a low groan of steel on stone, the doors parted—just enough to let them through.

Inside, the hall opened up into a vast chamber supported by twelve massive ironwood pillars, each wrapped in twisting sword patterns and adorned with golden engravings of ancient forging arts. A wide stone dais stood at the far end, where elders would sit in council. Behind it hung a massive tapestry bearing the Sword Valley sigil—a blade striking downward into the earth, splitting it clean in two.

There was no one inside now, but Jian could feel the weight of decisions made here. Every step echoed across the marble floor as they moved past inlaid sword formations carved directly into the tiles. Here, words had power, but the sword ruled above all.

“This hall is reserved for major decisions,” Qingsong whispered as they exited. “The Valley Master appears here only when necessary. But if you're ever summoned here… it means your path is either rising—or ending.”

Jian swallowed quietly.

Back outside, the clang of forges resumed, and Qingsong led Jian down a quieter passage branching off toward the eastern quarter of the valley. Here, the noise dimmed, and the air felt cooler. Stone corridors gave way to buildings of smoothed granite, surrounded by small bonsai trees and meditation stones.

They approached a smaller compound adorned with a copper plaque that read:

Elder Mo Cang – Records, Discipline & Instruction.

Qingsong stepped forward and knocked once.

“Come in,” came a gravelly voice from inside.

They entered to find a cluttered room—scrolls and steel fragments lay strewn across a long desk, while wall racks held tools of both forging and administration. Behind the desk sat an aged man with a neat silver beard and piercing eyes that looked through Jian as soon as he stepped in.

“Qingsong,” the elder said without looking up. “You’re late.”

Qingsong scratched his head. “There was a meal involved.”

The elder raised an eyebrow before shifting his gaze to Jian. “This is the one?”

“Yes. He’s come to join Sword Valley.”

Elder Mo Cang examined Jian for a long moment, his eyes flicking to the bundle of cloth under his arm, then to the rusted sword at his back. His brow furrowed slightly, but he said nothing of it.

“Name?” he asked curtly.

“Jian,” came the quiet reply.

“Background?”

“None worth recording,” Jian answered honestly.

Mo Cang grunted. “You’ll fit in.”

He reached beneath his desk and pulled out a blackstone medallion—simple, unadorned, with the Sword Valley insignia engraved on one side and a single character on the other: ‘Outer Disciple’.

“This will be your identification,” he said, handing it to Jian. “Lose it, and you’ll forge a new one with your own hands. You are now a registered disciple of Sword Valley. No swordsmanship will be taught here—only the way of steel and fire. If you work hard, your hands may one day shape a sword that history will remember.”

Jian bowed deeply. “Thank you, Elder.”

Mo Cang glanced at Qingsong. “He stays in Outer Quarters Last room.”

Qingsong nodded. “Got it.”

“One last thing,” Mo Cang added, fixing Jian with a hard stare. “This valley respects effort. Not blood, not birthright. We judge by steel. You earn your name here by what you make, not what you were.”

Jian’s grip tightened on the Heavenfall Iron wrapped in cloth. “I understand.”

Mo Cang gave a final nod, then waved them off.

As they stepped out into the light, Qingsong clapped Jian on the back. “Well, looks like you’re one of us now.”

The corridor curved gently uphill, lined with simple yet well-maintained stone lanterns that flickered with soft blue spirit-fire. Bai Qingsong led the way with his usual calm gait, speaking little as the two passed rows of modest stone houses embedded into the mountainside. Unlike the grand courtyards of the Verdant Jade Sect, Sword Valley’s residences bore no unnecessary ornament. Each was functional, weathered by time, and infused with a quiet dignity—like the people who lived within them.

They came to a modest wooden door set into a stone wall. A carved sword emblem was etched above the lintel—Sword Valley’s sigil. Qingsong gave a slight nod. “This will be your place from now on. Not grand, but it is yours.”

He handed Jian a worn iron key and left with a nod, letting the young swordsman enter alone.

Jian stepped inside.

The scent of sandalwood and old pine greeted him, earthy and dry. The room was small—perhaps no larger than his childhood room back in Zexin Village—but it was clean. A low bed stood against one wall, covered in neatly folded linen. Beside it, a writing desk carved from black poplar waited under an open lattice window, which let in the cool mountain air. There was even a small alcove with a brazier for warmth and a shelf with space for scrolls, books, or swords.

Jian stood there in silence, the door still half-open behind him.

The wind from the mountains sighed through the window, rustling the thin curtains like whispered words.

And suddenly, a tightness that had long lived in his chest began to loosen.

He dropped his pack to the ground.

For the first time since the fires consumed Zexin Village—for the first time since fleeing through ash and blood, sleeping beneath trees, hiding in cold riverbeds, training in borrowed corners of foreign towns—Jian had a room to call his own.

Not a shelter. Not a camp. A home.

He moved slowly, reverently. Fingers brushed over the desk’s smooth surface, lingered at the edge of the window frame, traced the grain of the wooden floor. These walls held no memories yet, but they were waiting—open to the future.

He sat on the bed, then lay back, arms spread. The mattress was firm but forgiving. The ceiling above was plain wood, but to Jian, it felt like sky and safety.

A wave of emotion surged up inside him—too complex to name. Relief. Gratitude. Weariness. And somewhere within it, a gentle, persistent hope.

He turned his gaze toward the window and watched the first stars prick through the night sky.

“I’ve finally come,” he murmured.

Sword Valley. A place of hard work, not hollow prestige. A place where swordsmanship was a path walked with grit and sweat, not arrogance.

He didn’t know what fate had in store for him—whether his journey would bring glory or sorrow—but for the first time in a long while, the uncertainty didn’t frighten him.

He pulled the blanket over himself, letting his sword rest by the bed, angled within reach. As his eyes closed, the tension in his body melted into the mattress. The sounds of the valley—the distant clash of practice swords, the murmur of the wind through pine—lulled him into sleep.

The night air was crisp, laced with the distant scent of pine and the faint tang of iron from the forges below. Jian drifted into sleep easily, his body exhausted, his spirit lulled by the quiet heartbeat of Sword Valley.

For a while, there was only darkness. Stillness.

Then the dream began.

❧

He was back in Zexin Village.

The sun filtered through the peach blossoms, the scent of early spring dancing on the breeze. Familiar voices called out—his mother humming a lullaby, his father’s deep chuckle as he carved wood by the threshold. Jian, younger, barefoot, laughed as he chased a wooden practice sword across the courtyard.

But then the wind changed.

The blossoms withered and fell, their pink petals turning to ash in mid-air.

A howl split the silence—deep, hungry, inhuman.

The sky darkened with smoke. Shadows spilled across the rooftops like oil. Screams echoed from every corner of the village, one blending into the next until they became a single, endless wail.

Jian turned. His home was ablaze. Flames curled through the beams. His mother’s form was visible only in silhouette, reaching for him with arms that dissolved into smoke. His father stood before her, sword drawn—but his eyes were vacant, throat already cut.

The enemy stood above the corpses. A tall figure cloaked in black. A mask of bone over his face, crimson sigils glowing faintly beneath. He did not speak. He only pointed.

At Jian.

“You ran,” a voice whispered behind him.

Jian turned—Lian, his childhood friend, the boy who had once laughed with him beneath the stars, now stood burned and broken, eyes milky and accusing.

“You lived,” Lian said. “We died.”

“No,” Jian whispered, stepping back. “I didn’t run—I couldn’t save—”

“You let it happen.”

The ground cracked beneath Jian’s feet. The village collapsed into a chasm, dragging the burning homes, the dead, the screams with it. Jian stumbled backward, trying to hold onto the world—but there was no ground left.

He fell.

Down, down into the black gorge, wind howling past him like the cries of the slain. He saw their faces: his mother, his father, Lian, villagers young and old. All gone. All swallowed by fate.

But in that freefall, something shifted.

A flicker of light burned inside him—a thread of silver, like the edge of a sword catching moonlight.

A voice echoed—not from outside, but from within. It was his own, sharpened by grief and forged by fire.

“If fate can take everything from me… then I’ll cut fate down.”

❧

Jian’s eyes snapped open.

He was no longer falling—but the sensation still lingered, sweat cold on his back, his breath ragged. His hands gripped the edges of the bed as though he’d truly been plummeting.

Outside the window, dawn was just beginning to bleed into the sky, turning the mountains silver and red. The distant clang of a sword striking steel rang through the valley like a morning bell.

Jian sat up slowly, heart pounding.

He looked around—his room, his new home. It was real. The nightmare had passed… but the truth it unearthed had not.

He touched the hilt of his sword.

“I will fight,” he whispered to the silence. “For them. For everything they took. I won’t let it end in ashes.”

The mountain wind answered softly, brushing against his face like a whisper of approval.

Jian rose.

He would meet this day not as a wanderer, but as a swordsman with a purpose.

Morning came with steel in its breath.

Mist coiled low over Sword Valley’s stone paths, the mountain air sharp and clean. From all directions came the metallic rhythm of swords meeting swords, the thud of wooden dummies, and the barked commands of senior disciples drilling the new arrivals.

Jian stepped out into the open courtyard, dressed in Sword Valley's dark training robes. His muscles still ached from the past weeks of travel and forging work, but the dream from the night before had left a fire in his chest that no soreness could smother.

He was not here to rest. He was here to grow stronger—strong enough to challenge fate itself.

The central training yard was carved into a natural basin ringed by stone terraces and bamboo scaffolds. Dozens of disciples were already training in various formations, sweat glistening on their brows as they moved in stances, lifted logs, and practiced sword routines. The sharp scent of sweat, damp earth, and lacquered wood filled the air.

“Line up!” a voice snapped, cutting clean through the chatter.

Jian turned toward it—and saw her.

Luo Yue.

She stood at the head of the courtyard like a blade drawn under moonlight. Tall, straight-backed, her long black hair tied high in a warrior’s knot. She wore simple robes with silver edging, a slender sword strapped diagonally across her back—its hilt woven with cloud-patterned silk. Her eyes were a glacial grey, her expression unreadable.

Jian had heard whispers of her already: the Rainveil Sword Maiden. It was said she could cut a falling leaf in half without breaking its fall. That she once stood alone at the mountain pass and held off ten attackers for a full hour.

Now, she was staring straight at him.

“You,” she said flatly, voice like ice cracking. “You’re the new one Elder Mo Cang registered yesterday?”

Her words hit like a slap.

He straightened slowly. Her tone was devoid of cruelty, but not of command. There was no warmth in it—only the steel discipline of someone who had seen too many fall behind.

“In Sword Valley, there are no excuses,” Luo Yue continued. “You don’t need to impress me. You need to survive the mountain.”

She gestured toward a pile of long timber logs stacked at the edge of the field. Each was thick, heavy, and freshly cut.

“Start there. Carry one log from here to the northern gate. Up the steps. Then to the southern ravine. Return it. That’s one lap.”

“How many laps?” Jian asked, voice steady despite the flutter in his gut.

“As many as it takes to stop shaking.”

He nodded, stepped to the pile, and hoisted the log onto his shoulder.

It was heavier than he expected. The weight bit into his back immediately, and his legs strained to hold balance. But he grit his teeth and started moving.

The path wound up steep flagstone stairs, past meditating disciples and stone shrines, then circled back down toward the ravine, where moss-covered rocks glistened with dew. Jian’s breath came harder with each step, sweat soaking through his robes before he reached the halfway mark.

Other disciples passed him on the trail—some nodding, others smirking at the new boy's struggle. Jian ignored them.

By the second lap, his arms burned. By the third, his legs trembled. On the fourth, he slipped on a patch of wet moss and landed hard on his shoulder, nearly dropping the log.

He bit down on the pain and forced himself up.

When he returned to the courtyard, gasping, Luo Yue was waiting with folded arms.

“Drop it. Now the stones.”

A cluster of stone weights rested beside a shallow pool. Jian stumbled toward them, his vision swimming. He lifted the smallest one—and it felt like lead. The task was simple: hold the weight in a horse stance until she said stop.

He lasted three minutes before his legs buckled.

Luo Yue didn’t flinch. “Again.”

He reset his stance. The ache in his thighs had turned to fire. His shoulders throbbed. Sweat poured from his brow into his eyes, blurring the world.

When he fell again, she stepped forward.

“You think strength is earned by swinging a sword once or twice?” Her voice was soft now, almost quiet—but every syllable was honed razor-thin. “You want to carve your will into fate itself? You can’t even hold your body up.”

Jian looked up at her. Pain blurred his vision, but his gaze did not waver.

“I will,” he rasped. “Even if it kills me.”

For the first time, something flickered in her eyes. Not approval. But recognition.

She turned and walked away. “Good. Then die training, if you must. Just don’t die slow.”

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That Night

The courtyard had emptied. The clang of swords had faded. Only the distant hum of insects and the occasional howl of wind across the peaks remained.

Jian sat alone by the training stones, his back against the cold flagstone, arms limp, legs still twitching from exhaustion. The moon hung overhead, pale and watching.

Every muscle in his body screamed. His shoulders were raw from the logs, his knees bruised from collapsing mid-stance. Even his breath felt like it scraped against his lungs.

He stared at his trembling hands.

Was this all he could manage?

He thought of Luo Yue’s words. Of how her gaze passed through him like he was already forgotten.

He thought of Zexin Village. Of flames devouring rooftops. Of his mother’s outstretched hand. Of Lian’s broken voice whispering, “You lived. We died.”

And then… he stood.

The moonlight cast his shadow long and thin across the training field. He walked slowly, painfully, back to the pile of logs. The night wind cut through his damp robes, but his spirit burned hot within.

One more lap.

He shouldered the weight again.

❧

The Days That Followed

Each morning began before the sun touched the valley floor.

While others still stirred in sleep, Jian was already dragging logs across the slopes, barefoot in the dew, blood crusting around old callouses. After the logs, he moved to the stones—his arms trembling in the horse stance until his body gave way. Then again. And again.

Luo Yue rarely spoke. She watched. Measured.

Her methods didn’t change. She offered no comfort. No advice.

Only the grueling tasks and a constant reminder: “You are not a swordsman until your body obeys your will.”

At night, Jian stayed behind, alone under the stars. He practiced breathing patterns. Trained stances until his legs gave way. When he couldn’t stand, he practiced forms sitting down, using only his arms.

Pain became constant—an old friend that greeted him in every joint, every movement. His fingers blistered. His feet bled. His bones ached.

There were moments—brief, cruel moments—when doubt crept in.

What if this was it? What if he was only ever meant to survive, not avenge?

But then he would dream.

He would see his home. His mother’s smile. His father’s calloused hands. The shadowed figure in the bone mask, still pointing at him through smoke.

And he would rise.

❧

One Month Later

The mountain wind still blew cold that morning, but Jian’s breath no longer trembled.

He stood beneath the rising sun, stripped to the waist. His back was a map of healed scars and fresh bruises, his arms knotted with lean muscle. His body, once soft from wandering, now moved with purpose.

He stepped toward the logs.

One he hoisted with a single motion, balanced across both shoulders.

No grimace. No shake.

He ran the route.

Up the stairs. Across the ridge. Down through the ravine. Back again.

He did five laps before the others arrived for morning drills.

Then, without pause, he approached the stone weights. Sank into horse stance.

Ten minutes passed. Then fifteen.

Luo Yue watched from the terrace, arms crossed. A glint of surprise flickered in her grey eyes—quickly buried beneath her usual stillness.

When Jian finally set the weight down, she descended the steps toward him.

“Your stance is stable,” she said, tone measured.

Jian didn’t look up. “I still have a long way to go.”

“Good,” she replied. “The moment you think you’ve arrived is the moment you start falling.”

Then—almost imperceptibly—she gave a nod.

“You’ve earned a wooden practice sword. You’ll join the morning sparring circle tomorrow.”

She turned and left without another word, her footsteps light as falling snow.

Jian stood alone, watching her go. A slow breath left his lungs, steady and full.

He wasn’t done.

But for the first time… he had taken a real step forward.

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The sparring courtyard echoed with the sound of flesh against flesh, grunts, and barked corrections. Disciples stood in a wide ring around a cleared stone platform. No swords. No weapons. Only open hands, feet, and spirit.

The rules were simple: no killing strikes, but everything else was permitted. A trial by combat to test one’s foundation.

Jian stood at the edge, muscles taut beneath his robes, his new wooden practice sword sheathed across his back. But for today’s test, it remained untouched.

Luo Yue stood nearby, watching with arms crossed, her gaze sharp and silent.

A short distance away, a tall youth with cropped hair and a perpetual smirk rolled his shoulders.

Yun Cheng.

One of the longer-standing outer disciples, known for his brutish style and fondness for humiliating newcomers.

“You sure you’re ready, valley flower?” Yun Cheng drawled, stepping into the circle barefoot. “Heard you just stopped crying during stances last week.”

Jian didn’t answer. He simply stepped forward, bowed, and took his position.

From the edge of the crowd, a voice called out.

“Don't go easy on him, Yun Cheng. Let him taste the valley's iron!”

Jian narrowed his eyes. The mocking tone rolled off him like rain. He was ready.

Or so he thought.

The signal was given. The match began.

Yun Cheng surged forward with no warning, fists raised in a tight guard. Jian dodged the first punch, dropped low, and swept with his leg—but the larger disciple leapt and brought his heel down in a brutal arc.

Jian blocked with his forearm. Pain exploded up his arm.

Too slow.

The next series came fast—elbow, knee, jab, jab—forcing Jian into a desperate retreat. He blocked some, evaded others, but every blow he took rattled his bones.

He struck back—once, twice. His fist landed solidly against Yun Cheng’s ribs—but it was like hitting a tree.

“Not bad,” Yun Cheng growled. “But you’ll need more than that.”

Then came the turning point.

A feint. A spinning backhand. A rising knee to Jian’s chest that knocked the air out of him.

He stumbled, gasping. And Yun Cheng capitalized—grabbing Jian by the collar and throwing him over his shoulder. Jian hit the ground hard. The impact drove stars across his vision.

The crowd hissed and murmured. Luo Yue remained still, unreadable.

Yun Cheng stepped back, cracked his knuckles, and laughed. “Looks like you’re still at the beginning.”

Jian pushed himself up—barely. He tried to rise again, but his legs gave out.

The match was called.

❧

Jian sat outside the main hall, cuts on his brow, lip bloodied, ribs sore. His pride hurt more than his body.

“Looks like I missed the dramatic part,” came a familiar voice.

He turned—and saw Bai Qingsong striding toward him, smiling warmly, a jug of wine slung over one shoulder.

“Senior Brother…” Jian breathed, ashamed.

“I heard you were training hard. I came to see for myself.”

Qingsong crouched beside him and looked him over with a sigh. “Well, I see you’re training your bones to crack like firewood. That’s... progress.”

Jian couldn’t help but laugh weakly. “I thought I was ready.”

“You are better. Stronger. More disciplined. But Jian, the path doesn’t reward effort alone. It rewards persistence—over years.”

He placed a hand on Jian’s shoulder.

“Today was your first fight. Not your last. Every defeat is a whetstone. Let it sharpen you, not dull you.”

Later, as Jian stood limping near the bamboo grove, a familiar voice stopped him.

“You held out longer than I expected.”

Luo Yue stepped from the trees, arms still folded—but her expression softer.

“Yun Cheng has been here three years. You’ve had one month.”

“I still lost.”

“Everyone does,” she said. “Even me. Especially in the beginning.”

He glanced at her, surprised. She didn’t elaborate.

“You improved quickly. That matters more than victory right now. Keep going, Jian. Your foundation is just beginning to settle. One day, it’ll hold a mountain.”

Then she turned and left, mist curling around her like a veil.

❧

The pain in Jian’s ribs pulsed in rhythm with his heartbeat as he lay in his room, bathed in moonlight.

His breath was ragged. His mind churned. Not with shame—but with quiet, simmering resolve.

He pressed a hand over his chest. Beneath the surface of his body… something stirred.

Deep within his martial vessel, the dormant inner orb —silent since the day he’d awakened it in grief—shuddered.

A thin crack ran across its surface. Then another.

From the fracture, a single thread of Qi slipped free.

It shimmered like mist, flowing into his inner meridians, seeping through his limbs, his bones, his breath. It moved without sound, like the whisper of a blade being drawn in darkness.

Unaware, Jian’s breathing deepened. His pain dulled. His muscles relaxed.

His body began to change.

Tendons subtly strengthened. His marrow drank in the trace Qi. The fatigue melted into a deep, cleansing slumber.

Outside, wind rustled the pine needles. A faint trail of silver mist drifted past the eaves.

And within Jian, for the first time—cultivation had begun.

❧

The morning mist hung low, blurring the line between earth and sky. But Jian felt unusually awake. Alert.

He stepped into the courtyard before sunrise, as always. The logs were there—the same as ever, thick and damp with dew. But when he reached down and lifted one—

It rose easily. Too easily.

Jian frowned. Had someone swapped it?

He grabbed another. Heavier. Still, he hoisted it without strain.

By the time he had completed the full lap around the valley, he was barely winded. His breath was steady. His body, loose and strong. He dropped the log and approached the stones.

He went straight for the largest one.

Before, it had mocked him with its unmovable weight. Now, he sank into a horse stance and held it with no more effort than if it were a branch.

His legs did not tremble.

His arms did not quake.

Time passed. Other disciples gathered. Some began whispering.

Even Luo Yue, watching from the courtyard steps, narrowed her eyes slightly.

When Jian finished and bowed, she approached him.

“You’re no longer at the base level,” she said. “Your strength has moved beyond muscle alone.”

He blinked. “I… don’t feel any different.”

“That’s how it starts,” she said. “Your body is aligning. We move forward.”

She led him to the valley’s smithing yard—a half-open stone workshop nestled into the cliff wall. Forges roared within, bellows breathing flame, anvils glowing red-hot.

“This is where real swords begin,” she said. “Before one masters the sword, they must understand it. From ore to edge.”

At the center of the forge stood a towering steel hammer, its head broad and cruel, the handle thick as a man’s arm.

“This is your new training,” Luo Yue said. “Each morning, hammer steel. Flatten iron bars. Harden your tendons, refine your timing. Feel the shape of strength in every strike.”

Jian stepped up, gripped the hammer—and nearly dropped it.

It was heavier than it looked. Far heavier than any log.

His knuckles whitened. His arms screamed from the effort of simply lifting it.

But he did not stop.

With a roar, he raised it high and brought it down onto the glowing steel slab. Clang!

The blow rang across the valley like a thunderclap.

Luo Yue nodded. “Every strike has intent. Every swing builds control.”

Later that afternoon, sweat-soaked and bruised, Jian was cooling down beside the pool near the training terrace when familiar footsteps approached.

“Figured I’d find you either in pain or nearly passed out,” Bai Qingsong grinned, waving a scroll.

Jian gave a tired laugh. “You’re not wrong.”

Qingsong sat beside him and handed over the scroll, sealed with Sword Valley’s wax stamp.

“I spoke with Elder Mo Cang. He agreed to let you begin martial technique study. This,” he tapped the scroll, “is the basic form set of Crimson Petal Descent.”

Jian’s eyes widened.

Crimson Petal Descent—an elegant, deceptive sword style based on wide sweeps, feints, and sudden cuts. Light like drifting flower petals, deadly like the blade beneath.

“It’s not easy,” Qingsong warned. “Requires precision footwork, flexible core movement, and endurance. But I think it suits you.”

Jian unsealed the scroll, reverently rolling it open.

As his eyes scanned the first diagrams—stances with swirling footwork, blade arcs resembling calligraphy strokes—something stirred in him. Not awe. But recognition.

He nodded. “I’ll learn it. Alongside forging.”

“Double-path training? You sure?”

“I have to.”

Qingsong smiled. “Then I’ll visit again soon. And this time, I expect you to last more than five seconds in a spar.”

Jian’s routine grew heavier and sharper.

By dawn: log runs, stone stances.

Midmorning: hammer strikes over iron blocks, each swing ringing in his bones. The act refined his shoulders, wrists, spine. His body grew dense, firm, enduring.

Afternoons: sword form practice with a weighted wooden blade. He mimicked the Crimson Petal Descent movements—slow, wide arcs through the air, then narrowing into sudden darts. His body struggled to match the form’s grace, but each day he improved.

At night, when others rested, Jian practiced balance stances on the bamboo poles by the cliff's edge, repeating sword sequences until his arms went numb.

Unseen. Unfelt. Silent.

Each day of labor. Each swing of the hammer. Each motion of the sword.

They left deeper impressions on his martial vessel.

Within it, the fractured orb now bore five thin cracks. Like the petals of a flower splitting open.

And with each crack, more Qi escaped.

It flowed through his meridians—coating muscle fiber, threading through bone, nourishing his spirit in sleep. His skin became firmer. His senses sharper. His blood warmer, like fire slowly building in a furnace.

Jian remained unaware. He only felt stronger. More precise. More… alive.

But soon, the signs would become too great to ignore.

# Chapter nine

## Embers stirred by iron

The clang of metal, the rhythm of breath, and the silent pulse of tension filled the courtyard as disciples gathered in a wide circle once more.

But this was no ordinary sparring.

Today’s match was different.

The opponent stood calmly in the center—a disciple with the crest of the inner valley sewn into his robe. His name was Feng Linhai, a composed, disciplined youth known for his ruthless efficiency and quiet pride. Word had it he was preparing to advance toward sword cultivation proper.

Jian stood opposite him, shoulders squared, eyes calm.

His robe was soaked with sweat from morning drills. A sheen of quiet steel lined his muscles. A month ago, he would’ve collapsed under Linhai’s gaze alone.

Today, he stood tall.

Among the crowd, Bai Qingsong and Luo Yue watched from the courtyard edge, both silent, eyes narrowed.

“Ready?” Luo Yue called.

Feng Linhai merely nodded.

Jian did the same.

The match began.

The first exchange was fluid.

Feng Linhai struck first—a fast, darting blow aimed at Jian’s side. Jian twisted away, parried with an open palm, and countered with a low kick. Linhai blocked it, spun, and followed with a whip-like elbow toward Jian’s collarbone.

Fast!

Jian barely ducked—but his movement had grown sharper. Tighter. His instincts faster than thought.

They clashed again.

Palm against fist. Elbow against forearm. Kicks slamming into each other with brutal rhythm.

Feng Linhai narrowed his eyes. “You’ve improved.”

Jian didn’t reply. He just pressed forward.

Three months ago, he would’ve been overwhelmed. Now, with every blow, he adjusted. His feet found balance faster. His body responded without hesitation.

And then—something shifted.

Feng Linhai launched a powerful straight punch at Jian’s chest.

Jian moved to block, but as he did, he felt something—a subtle pressure in his belly, like heat rising in a kettle. It coursed into his arms. Time slowed slightly. His body surged forward with unfamiliar strength.

Crack!

His block didn't just stop the punch—it knocked Linhai’s arm aside and opened a gap.

Jian didn’t think.

He stepped in, pivoted, and slammed a fist into Linhai’s abdomen.

A dull thud rang out.

Linhai stumbled backward, stunned.

The crowd went still.

Jian followed up—three fast punches, a spinning low kick, and a rising elbow that caught Linhai across the chin.

The inner disciple fell.

The match was over.

Silence.

Then murmurs. Shocked whispers. No one had expected this. A month ago, Jian had been crushed by an outer disciple. Now, he had defeated an inner disciple in open sparring.

Jian stood in the center, chest heaving, fists shaking.

He looked down at his hands.

What was that?

There was stillness inside him—but beneath it, a quiet echo. A hum. His strikes had landed too hard. His body had moved too fast. There had been a heat—no, a force—guiding his limbs.

It hadn’t been conscious. It had just… happened.

Feng Linhai climbed back to his feet, clutching his jaw. He gave Jian a long look. “That wasn’t just strength.”

Jian didn’t reply.

He turned—only to find Bai Qingsong and Luo Yue approaching.

Luo Yue’s expression was unreadable.

Qingsong’s was calm, but curious.

“You felt it, didn’t you?” Qingsong asked, voice low.

Jian swallowed. “Something… moved. Inside. I don’t understand it.”

“You don’t need to. Not yet.”

Qingsong clapped a hand on his shoulder. “Come. It’s time we spoke to Elder Mo Cang. He’ll know what stage you’re stepping into.”

.❧

The quiet of the Sword Valley’s inner sanctum was almost holy.

Walls carved from white stone shimmered faintly with qi-conductive veins. Tall incense burners sent ribbons of pale smoke swirling into the air, perfumed with mountain sage and cold iron.

Elder Mo Cang sat cross-legged upon a raised dais within his personal hall, robed in layered silks of black and gray, his long white beard neatly tied and his thin eyes calm as a still lake.

Jian knelt before him, hands resting on his thighs. Bai Qingsong stood quietly behind.

“You say he resonated with Qi in the heat of battle?” Mo Cang asked.

Qingsong nodded. “Unconsciously. It wasn’t channeled—it burst through him.”

“Hm.” The elder gave Jian a long, penetrating gaze. “Place your hands on your knees. Breathe slowly.”

Jian obeyed.

Mo Cang leaned forward and placed his weathered palms on Jian’s shoulders. A moment passed—then a surge of intent filled the chamber.

The elder’s Qi pushed inward.

Jian gasped.

It wasn’t painful—but it was invasive. A pressure that sought, searched, unfolded him from within. He felt it flow down his spine, into his belly, up his arms.

Then—

Response.

A light hum, soft at first.

From inside Jian’s body, a slick, flowing wave of energy began to rise.

It was unlike anything Mo Cang had expected.

With a low, crackling sound like leaves stirring in wind, a translucent blanket of energy shimmered across Jian’s body.

It was mostly clear—like mountain water—but threaded with soft orange-gold undertones, like morning sun across a quiet lake.

It did not radiate from a single core.

It came from everywhere

From his skin. His bones. His breath.

From within his entire form, like a hidden spring had been buried in his flesh and soul, quietly building pressure until now.

Mo Cang pulled back slightly, brows furrowing. His palms hovered an inch above Jian’s body, but the energy still responded to his presence, rippling gently like surface tension disturbed.

“This…” the elder murmured, voice low and grave, “is not ordinary Qi.”

Qingsong leaned forward. “What do you mean?”

Mo Cang slowly stood, eyes never leaving Jian. “Most disciples awaken Qi at their dantian’s core. The vessel resonates with one of the sword archetypes—Jian, the balanced blade; Dao, the overwhelming force; Shuangjian, the twin strike; Zhanjian, the cleaving fury; or Lingjian, the agile spirit.”

He paced around Jian once, then twice.

“But his Qi… flows like water from a dozen hidden springs. It’s not wild, but it’s not aligned. It lacks resonance—no vibration with any of the known sword archetypes. It behaves as though the sword itself has yet to be named.”

He paused, turning to Qingsong.

“In all my years… I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Jian looked up, brows furrowed. “Is that bad?”

Mo Cang’s expression softened, though faint concern lingered in his gaze. “It is neither good nor bad. It is unknown. The sword path is vast, and we know only pieces of it. But to tread a path untread is to be both torchbearer and prey to fate.”

He folded his arms behind his back.

“I must confer with the Valley Master,” he said at last. “Only he might recall ancient scriptures that speak of this type of resonance. Until then…”

He gave Jian a long look.

“Continue your training. But listen closely to your body and your qi. Whatever this is—it will not remain dormant for long.”

Jian walked alone beneath the crimson sky, his shadow stretching long against the cobblestone paths of Sword Valley.

The late afternoon wind whispered through pine and steel wind-chimes, the distant ring of hammers echoing like the heartbeat of the valley itself.

But Jian heard none of it.

His thoughts were heavier than iron.

No archetype...

Not even a name for what’s inside me.

He paused beside a stone bridge overlooking one of the small streams that fed the valley’s gardens. The water was cold and clear, but when he looked at his reflection, he couldn’t help but feel it was warping—slightly unfamiliar. Like the energy inside him was altering even his sense of self.

He clenched a fist.

“What if I’m… wrong for this place?” he muttered aloud. “What if I don’t belong here either?”

The silence offered no comfort.

For years, he’d wandered, rootless and hungry for purpose. Sword Valley had felt like home. But now the same strength that was rising within him—the thing he thought would give him identity—was the very thing marking him as other.

He looked up at the fading light.

Still… I made a vow.

I will have my revenge. Even if the heavens don't recognize the path I walk—I'll carve my own.

He turned and walked on, quietly, head bowed.

Later that evening, in a quiet back chamber of the forge hall, Bai Qingsong and Luo Yue stood by a window, watching Jian’s silhouette fade down the stone steps toward the lower quarters.

Luo Yue was silent for a while, arms crossed.

“You saw the energy yourself,” Qingsong said. “What do you think?”

Her voice came, sharp and quiet. “I think it was beautiful… but dangerous.”

Qingsong raised a brow. “You think he’s a threat?”

“I think he doesn’t know what he is,” she replied, turning slightly. “And when a sword doesn’t know what it’s forged for… it can just as easily cut the wielder as the enemy.”

There was a moment of silence between them.

“I trained him hard,” she said after a pause. “Made him break, rebuild himself. I thought I was preparing him for our sword path… but now I’m not sure that’s the path he’s walking.”

Qingsong nodded slowly.

“There’s something ancient about him,” he murmured. “Like an echo from before the sects. Before the archetypes.”

He sighed.

“I’ve sent word to Master Xiao Ruhai,” he added. “If anyone can recall what this might be… it’s him.”

Luo Yue looked out the window again, the wind catching her loose hair.

“Let’s just hope whatever Jian’s carrying… doesn’t wake up before he’s ready.”

That night, Jian slept deeply.

His body, exhausted from sparring, lay still beneath the modest covers of his disciple’s room.

But inside him, in the quiet of his martial vessel, movement stirred.

The orb—his mysterious core, cracked over weeks of relentless training—pulsed faintly. A shimmer of light danced across its fractured shell.

Then—something changed.

It was as if the orb had sensed a foreign intrusion.

The earlier flood of Qi summoned by Elder Mo Cang’s probe had left a trace, like ash on still water.

And the orb did not like it.

With a soundless shudder, the cracks began to close—deliberately. Not from healing, but from defense.

Slivers of light were sealed shut.

Qi that had once leaked gently into Jian’s meridians now slowed… thinned… retreated.

As though the orb itself were folding inward, withdrawing, unwilling to share further.

A final pulse echoed through the vessel.

And then… stillness.

Jian shifted slightly in his sleep, brows furrowing. He didn’t wake—but somewhere inside, a part of him felt the loss.

The wellspring was hiding.

And whatever it was…

It was beginning to think for itself.

.❧

Morning came, silver and cold.

Mist curled low over the Sword Valley courtyards as dew clung to the training stones and bamboo railings like reluctant memories. Disciples emerged one by one, blades strapped to their backs or carried in bundles. The clang of steel and the thrum of focused breath began anew, the valley coming to life in rhythm.

Jian was already awake.

He stood alone in the courtyard behind the disciple quarters, the training logs stacked neatly beside him. His breathing was steady. His stance rooted.

He wrapped his fingers around one of the largest logs—one that would’ve buckled his knees just weeks ago—and lifted.

It rose easily. Too easily.

He frowned.

Moving to the stone weights, he grasped the heaviest—an iron pillar bound in runic seals—and held it above his head. His body obeyed. The strength was still there.

But something else wasn’t.

Why does it feel... empty?

He sat down cross-legged beneath a sloping pine and closed his eyes, reaching inward. He’d begun doing this more often—listening to the energy inside him, watching how it moved.

But today…

There was no movement.

The soft, vibrant hum that had followed him these past weeks, the subtle stream of Qi that danced like sunlight in a river—it was gone. Or rather, locked away.

The orb in his martial vessel no longer pulsed. No more cracks. No more leaking light. Just a sealed thing, resting in perfect stillness. Like an eye closed behind a locked gate.

Jian’s brow furrowed.

Did I do something wrong?

He breathed deeper, trying to summon the same sensation from the last spar. Nothing. His meridians, once tingling with slow streams of unfamiliar Qi, now felt… dry. Dormant.

He opened his eyes.

The sun was rising behind Sword Peak, its golden rays catching the edge of the forge hall rooftops.

Yet the warmth didn’t reach him.

He stood slowly, shoulders stiff.

So… it wasn’t mine after all. It was just passing through. Borrowed? Or tested?

He looked down at his hands—scarred, bruised, stronger than ever.

Then I’ll earn it back. Even if the qi hides again, I’ll tear the strength from the stones of this valley if I must.

He exhaled, the breath long and controlled.

Then he picked up the hammer and returned to the forge station for morning duty.

Steel rang out once more in Sword Valley.

But inside Jian…

a silence deeper than steel had taken root.

# Chapter ten

## The immortal at the summit

The clang of iron echoed behind him as Jian left the forge courtyard at dawn, the weight of silence in his core heavier than steel.

He didn’t wait for training. He didn’t speak to Luo Yue or Qingsong.

There was only one person who might understand what was happening.

Elder Mo Cang sat behind a heavy cedar desk in his stone chamber, poring over scrolls older than the sect itself. He looked up the moment Jian entered, eyes narrowing.

“You feel it too,” the elder said before Jian could speak.

Jian nodded slowly. “The flow is gone. The orb is quiet. It’s like I’ve lost something that was never mine.”

Mo Cang stood, expression sharp with concern. “Sit.”

Once again, Jian knelt, and the elder pressed his palms to his shoulders. A gentle current of Qi entered Jian’s body. Mo Cang’s brows furrowed deeper the longer he searched.

Nothing.

Not even residue.

The orb was sealed—not dormant, not damaged—sealed by its own volition.

Mo Cang drew back, troubled.

“This should not be possible,” he murmured. “Qi does not come and go. Once awakened, it becomes part of the practitioner. Even those who cripple themselves still retain its echoes in their meridians.”

He stared at Jian as if seeing a riddle carved in flesh.

“There are no echoes in you, Jian,” he whispered. “Only a wall.”

Jian looked down, tense. “So I’ve lost it?”

“No…” Mo Cang said slowly. “It’s not lost. It’s… hidden. With purpose.”

He turned away, pacing the room, muttering to himself. “Resonance outside archetypes. Now vanishing Qi. A living vessel that chooses when to give or take...”

He halted.

“We must go to the Valley Master.”

Jian’s heart skipped. “Master… Xiao Ruhai?”

Mo Cang nodded gravely. “He alone has lived long enough—and seen deeply enough—to understand what this might mean. Come.”

They walked in silence through winding paths few disciples ever tread. Upward, always upward, the stone steps etched into the cliffside flanked by swords driven into the rock like ancient offerings.

The Summit Hall sat nestled at the mountain’s peak, carved directly into the granite face of Sword Peak, its front draped in silver mist.

Jian had heard whispers.

That Xiao Ruhai rarely spoke.

That he was a master of the Hidden Sword Sutra—a man who had defeated ten sects in a single season, and then vanished from the world to found Sword Valley.

Jian swallowed.

He had never seen the man.

Never even glimpsed his shadow.

But as the doors opened and he stepped inside, Jian stopped breathing for a moment.

❧

The hall was vast, built of stone and stillness. Dozens of blades lined the walls—each one a legend, each humming faintly with slumbering intent. At the far end, atop a raised dais, sat a single figure.

Xiao Ruhai.

He wore plain white robes, edged in storm-gray. His hair was silver—not with age, but with stillness, like moonlight woven into strands. His face was ageless—neither young nor old, calm as still water before dawn.

He sat with his back straight, a simple longsword resting across his knees. His eyes opened slowly as they approached, and Jian felt it—not pressure, not aura, but the absence of all distraction. As though the world had narrowed to a single gaze.

For a heartbeat, Jian was not a disciple, not a boy from a ruined village, not even a swordsman.

He was a question.

Mo Cang bowed deeply. “Valley Master, forgive the intrusion.”

Xiao Ruhai’s voice was quiet and clear.

“Speak.”

“We have found something… or rather, something has hidden itself from us,” Mo Cang said, motioning for Jian to kneel. “This boy awakened a strange Qi. It pulsed from his entire body. But now—nothing. It has vanished. Sealed. There is no archetype resonance. I do not understand what he is.”

Xiao Ruhai studied Jian in silence for a long time.

Then he stood.

And the air in the hall shifted—like the wind before a storm. Yet his movements were calm, deliberate, filled with a grace that felt… unreal.

He stepped down the dais slowly and walked toward Jian. Each footfall felt like a line of scripture being etched into the stone.

Jian kept his head low, heart thundering.

Then—Xiao Ruhai placed a hand on Jian’s chest.

A whisper of Qi passed between them.

And Xiao Ruhai’s eyes narrowed.

“…Ah,” he said.

Not surprised. Not confused.

But intrigued.

“Now this,” he murmured, “this I have not seen in a long time.”

He looked at Mo Cang.

“Leave us.”

The great doors closed behind Elder Mo Cang with a deep, echoing sound that made Jian’s pulse jump. He was alone now with Xiao Ruhai, the master of Sword Valley—the man who stood at the summit of swordsmen in the land.

Jian remained kneeling, not out of custom, but necessity. The weight of presence in this hall made standing feel unnatural.

Xiao Ruhai turned and paced slowly toward the dais once more, his long robes trailing across the stone like water.

“You awakened something,” he said quietly. “Then it sealed itself.”

Jian nodded.

“A mystery. But not an unknown one.”

He stopped before the sword resting on the dais—an old blade, its scabbard plain, wrapped in aged linen as though it belonged to a hermit, not a master.

Xiao Ruhai placed a hand atop it.

“There is an art… long buried beneath time and silence. A lineage of swordsmanship passed in quiet breath, never written, never declared. It echoes through every philosophy of the blade—graceful yet deadly, fluid but unyielding. To master it is not to conquer the sword, but to become it.”

His voice softened.

“It is the Whispering Steel.”

Jian felt something stir inside him at the words—as though the orb within him had heard its own name for the first time.

Xiao Ruhai continued, “It was said to have originated with a swordsman called Tianque, who lived before the five sword archetypes were ever named. A wanderer. A recluse. A genius.”

He turned to face Jian.

“He studied every form, observed every flow of battle, and discarded what was excessive. He forged his art not on the foundation of power—but listening. Responding. Adapting. Enduring. Whispering Steel is not a style... it is a reflection.”

Jian finally raised his head.

“And Tianque?”

Xiao Ruhai's eyes gleamed with restrained awe.

“They say he walked the land until there were no worthy opponents. When the heavens offered him a trial, he answered. He ascended—the first mortal to break the mortal coil and become a Sword Immortal.”

Jian’s breath caught.

“And before he left this realm,” Xiao Ruhai added, his voice like stone sliding into place, “he forged a relic—Heavenfall Iron. His legacy in metal.”

He stepped down again and gestured to Jian.

“Come. Let us see what sleeps within you.”

Behind the dais, a narrow passage led into a stone-walled chamber, round and bare, with only a single candle flickering at its center. There were no distractions here—no ornaments, no weapons. Only purpose.

Xiao Ruhai stood across from him, barefoot, calm.

“Clear your thoughts,” he said. “Do not call your strength. Let it come if it wishes.”

He raised one hand—and a gust of invisible pressure struck Jian in the chest.

Not violent.

Testing.

Probing.

Then another, sharper this time. Jian staggered slightly, his body resisting on instinct.

Then a third wave surged—not toward his limbs, but into his core, where the orb sat sealed.

And something… pushed back.

A flicker of heat, faint, defiant.

The orb cracked—not under strain, but in protest.

Then—release.

A whisper of Qi escaped, subtle and slick, flowing up Jian’s meridians in fine threads. Like silk spun from wind.

Xiao Ruhai’s eyes sharpened as he stepped forward and pressed two fingers to Jian’s sternum.

“What is this Qi?” he whispered.

The energy unspooled gently, wreathing Jian in a translucent aura—clear as glass, but laced with an orange hue, warm and alien.

Xiao Ruhai drew back, gaze serious.

“This… is not your Qi.”

Jian stiffened.

The master’s expression did not change, but his tone grew gentler.

“It is Heavenfall Iron’s Qi. You carry the relic.”

Silence.

Jian froze—shoulders rigid, thoughts spinning. He looked away.

He hadn’t told anyone.

Not even Qingsong.

Not even Luo Yue.

That the shattered remnant he kept hidden, the strange shard he had taken from the ruins of Zexin Village, was Heavenfall Iron.

How much did Xiao Ruhai know?

Had he been involved?

His voice was tight. “If you knew, why bring me here?”

Xiao Ruhai tilted his head slightly.

“I suspected. Now I am sure.”

He stepped back, folding his arms.

“I will not take it from you. If that is what you fear.”

Jian blinked.

“You… don’t want it?”

The master smiled—calm, faint, profound.

“No. My path was forged long ago. I have my legacy, and I walk it to its end. That relic is not meant for me.”

He turned toward the candle.

“But if it chose you… you must understand that it will not give you power without purpose. It listens only to those who listen in return.”

He looked over his shoulder.

“Can you do that, Jian?”

Jian lowered his gaze.

The fear in his heart melted—slowly, but surely. He nodded.

“I’ll try.”

Xiao Ruhai closed his eyes, as if listening to something distant.

“Then your path begins now.”

The wide hall echoed behind him as Jian left the summit. The air outside was sharp, touched by mountain breeze, but he barely noticed.

He returned to his quarters in silence.

His steps were heavy—not from fatigue, but from the weight of what he had learned.

A lost sword art passed down in whispers.

A relic from before the world had names for swords.

A man who became immortal and left behind a legacy wrapped in silence.

Jian slid the door shut behind him.

Inside the modest stone room, a box waited at the foot of his bedding.

He knelt beside it.

Hands slow, reverent, he opened the old cloth-wrapped bundle. The piece of Heavenfall Iron lay within—jagged-edged, black with an iridescent sheen, as though a forge-fire had frozen mid-flicker across its surface.

It pulsed faintly.

Not with light—but memory.

Jian’s eyes lingered on the shard.

How did this ever come into my hands?

The memory of Zexin Village returned—its ashes, the broken beams of his home, the twisted limbs of his family. All burned into his soul.

How much grief has this caused?

His hand trembled.

The grief. The mystery. The power.

He wrapped the shard again.

And stood.

❧

The climb back up to the Summit Hall was quiet. No disciples wandered this high. Morning sun crested over the ridges, and the cold wind tugged at Jian’s sleeves.

The double doors of the hall were closed.

He knocked.

A long moment passed.

Then, without a sound, they opened. The same quiet presence—the weight of sword will—washed over him as before.

Xiao Ruhai stood waiting within, hands clasped behind his back, facing the large meditation stone in the center of the chamber.

Jian walked forward and bowed.

When he rose, he unwrapped the cloth and placed the shard into the master's hands.

Xiao Ruhai turned, and for a heartbeat… his expression softened. Wonder, recognition, perhaps even nostalgia flickered through his eyes.

He ran his fingers along the length of the jagged relic.

“This,” he said quietly, “is truly Heavenfall Iron.”

He held it up to the light.

“But it is not whole. This… is a fragment.”

Jian frowned. “It can still be forged?”

Xiao Ruhai nodded slowly.

“Yes. But not as it is. Heavenfall Iron is not like ordinary metal. To awaken its spirit—to shape it into a true sword—it requires more than heat and hammer.”

He turned to Jian, voice low and solemn.

“There are three sacred components needed to forge a blade worthy of the Whispering Steel.”

Phoenix Ash

“A rare spiritual residue left behind when a Flame Phoenix sheds its mortal body and is reborn. It burns away all impurity and grants spiritual rebirth to any material it touches. Without it, Heavenfall Iron cannot shed its burdens.”

Jian’s breath caught. A phoenix?

Heart Flame

“Not a material—but a method. To activate Phoenix Ash, one must summon their Heart Flame: the fire of their will, purpose, and sword intent. Only a swordsman with unwavering resolve can draw it forth.”

Jian looked down at his hands. The journey ahead was steep.

Soulbound Silksteel

“An alloy spun from the threads of spiritual silkworms of the Mistwoven Peaks, woven with ore mined from the Mountain’s Heart. This alloy is used for the hilt wrap, pommel core, and blade’s binding. It ensures the sword is not simply wielded—but bound to your soul.”

Jian absorbed the words in silence.

It was not just about forging a sword.

It was about becoming worthy of the sword.

Xiao Ruhai placed the shard back in Jian’s hand and stepped back.

“ Only those who forge a sword from Heavenfall Iron can learn the forms of Whispering Steel. That is why none who came after him succeeded. No one ever obtained the relic.”

Jian held the relic now, but the burden had grown tenfold.

A fragment of Heavenfall Iron.

A path walked by no one for centuries.

A sword that must be born from flame, silk, soul, and ash.

Xiao Ruhai spoke once more, his voice steady and patient.

“If you choose to walk this path… your sword will not merely cut. It will listen, respond, and change with you.”

He turned toward the meditation stone once more.

“This legacy was lost… but perhaps, through you, it shall echo again.”

❧

The Summit Hall dimmed as evening shadows stretched across the mountain. Jian knelt in silent meditation on the stone platform behind the main chamber, where the mountain’s breath passed freely through open walls and paper lanterns flickered against the wind.

Before him lay the fragment of Heavenfall Iron, placed on a small altar of cedar wood.

Master Xiao Ruhai stood a few paces away, arms folded behind his back, the wind catching the edges of his white robes like they bore no weight.

"Sit still," he said softly. "Do not seek to command the shard. Simply listen. The sword is not a tool—it is a whisper. If it chooses to speak, do not miss it."

Jian closed his eyes.

He breathed in.

The scent of pine. Steel. The faint burnt ozone of Qi.

He reached out—not with hand, but spirit. His thoughts slowed. His heartbeat dropped. The world became silence wrapped in tension.

And then—

A vibration.

Not sound. Not light.

But a sense.

Like a whisper behind stone.

A weight pressing inward, not down.

The shard pulsed once. Just once.

A flicker of something ancient. Not kind. Not cruel.

Just watching.

But then—nothing.

The silence returned.

Jian opened his eyes.

Xiao Ruhai remained motionless. His voice, when it came, was quiet as snowfall.

“Tianque did not teach. He left behind seven scrolls—each inscribed with a single form of the Whispering Steel Path. No one has ever truly mastered them.”

Jian looked up, puzzled. “But… if the scrolls exist, surely—”

“They were seen as trophies,” Xiao interrupted. “Curios. Wall hangings in clan vaults and sect archives. No one could comprehend them. Because the art is not only in the form—but in the sword itself. A sword forged from Heavenfall Iron, bound to its wielder, reveals the truth within the scrolls.”

He turned, and from a sealed case beside the meditation platform, withdrew a single bamboo scroll.

Its edges were singed. The characters carved in silver ink.

“This is the first form,” Xiao Ruhai said, placing it before Jian. “The only scroll I possess.”

With reverence, Xiao unraveled the scroll.

Each character on the bamboo strips shimmered faintly in the lantern light.

1. Petal Breeze

“Light and graceful. A form that dances rather than strikes. The swordsman becomes like a drifting blossom—beautiful, unpredictable, impossible to grasp. But each step, each angle, each cut—is calculated to pierce the weakest folds of the enemy’s defenses. It does not overwhelm. It listens. This form gave birth to the philosophies of both the Jian and Shuangjian sword paths.”

Jian’s breath caught. The descriptions painted images in his mind—of flowing footwork, weightless steps, and pinpoint strikes hidden in elegance.

He continued, “The others are…

Iron-Crane Descending”

“A single, spiraling drop from above. The full force of the body focused into one overwhelming cut. Its beauty lies in how controlled it is—perfect posture, timing, and momentum. The blade falls not with rage, but with certainty, like the wings of a crane touching the lake. It marries elegance with impact, and influenced the Jian and Zhanjian styles.”

Xiao mimicked the motion with one hand—a smooth arc, descending with invisible weight.

Howl of the Free Sky

“A technique of chaos mastered through rhythm. The blade sings. The swordsman becomes a storm—slashing, pivoting, leaping. It feels wild, but the chaos is crafted, honed. It channels the fearlessness of Dao swordsmen and the dual unpredictability of Shuangjian styles.”

Jian felt a thrum in his heart just hearing it.

Mirror of the Silent Veil

“Deception becomes steel. The blade barely moves—but the mind of the opponent is struck a thousand times. An illusionary technique. The true strike is hidden in inaction. This is the root of the Lingjian path—where illusion, stillness, and spirit become indistinguishable.”

Xiao paused here, expression unreadable.

The master gently rolled the rest of the scroll closed.

“I know little of the last three,” he admitted. “Only their names.”

Fifth Form — Mountain Vein Sundering

Sixth Form — Breath Between Worlds

Seventh Form — Whispering Heaven’s Silence

“The final one,” Xiao added, “is a myth. It was said to be known only to Tianque himself. It is believed to be the final expression of his sword art—where no cut is made, and yet the world still bleeds.”

Xiao returned the scroll to Jian’s side.

“I will help you learn Petal Breeze. But know this—without the true sword, your understanding will be shallow. The Whispering Steel Path must be lived, not learned.”

Jian nodded slowly, the weight of the moment wrapping around him like a sheath of fate.

He looked once more at the Heavenfall Iron shard.

It no longer looked like a relic.

It looked like a promise.

He bowed to Xiao Ruhai.

“I want to learn.”

❧

Moonlight filtered through the slats of the training hall's open walls, illuminating motes of dust and the pale silhouette of Jian as he stood barefoot on the polished wood floor. A bamboo practice sword rested lightly in his hands—far lighter than the ironwood training blades he had used before.

The scroll Master Xiao had given him lay beside a flickering lantern.

He took a breath.

Then, step.

Pivot.

Glide.

His movements were too sharp. Too rigid.

He could feel it.

The sword was not dancing.

It was marching.

Again.

He tried to imagine petals, wind, breath.

Again.

He imagined Bai Qingsong's effortless slashes. Luo Yue’s drifting grace. The fluidity of Xiao Ruhai’s gaze.

Again.

But no matter how many times he practiced, it felt like he was forcing the sword to move, rather than listening to how it wanted to move.

The first night ended in sweat and frustration.

The next morning, Jian tried again.

Then the next.

Then again in the evening.

Each time, he came closer. A footfall lighter. A cut more precise. A pirouette closer to balance.

After a week, something stirred.

Deep in his martial vessel, the orb pulsed faintly.

Crack.

A thin fissure opened—so fine he did not notice it at first.

But the next day, when he trained again, the petals danced slightly more freely, his footwork moved with uncanny flow—and his limbs felt like silk drawn by current.

Another crack.

Qi flowed—not in floods, but in whispers.

Heavenfall Qi. The same subtle, spiritual force as before, returning to him in droplets.

The bamboo sword he held that morning fractured mid-step—without even striking anything.

It simply snapped in half, unable to contain the rising tide of intent in his motion.

He carved another one.

That, too, broke after a week.

He turned to ironwood. Then tempered steel. Then composite alloy blades.

All shattered.

Not in clumsy use.

But at the moment the technique aligned—when Petal Breeze truly took shape.

The sword refused to become one with the form.

The deeper Jian grasped the form, the more destructive the resonance.

He returned to the forge.

Nights turned to weeks. He hammered, melted, folded, and quenched. He experimented with forging techniques from Elder Mo Cang’s archives. Tried different balance ratios, tempering depths, alloy mixes.

Every time, the blade gleamed with hope—

—and cracked with failure.

The swords could not hold the Whispering Steel Intent.

By the third month, Jian stood in his forge chamber staring at yet another broken blade lodged into the wall. His hands were blistered. His brows furrowed in fatigue.

He sank to his knees before the forge’s glowing heart.

“Is it impossible…?”

The Heavenfall Iron fragment glimmered faintly where it lay wrapped in cloth on a side altar, untouched since his meditation weeks ago.

“Must I forge the true sword to move forward?”

He closed his eyes.

“Why did it come to me?”

All the grief from Zexin Village. The silence of the orb. The curiosity of Elder Mo Cang. The scrutiny of Xiao Ruhai.

None of them gave answers.

Only questions.

That night, Jian stood atop a high peak outside Sword Valley.

The wind whipped his robes around him. In his hands, another training blade—already splintered at the hilt.

He took his stance.

Petals in the wind.

Again.

He flowed.

Step. Pivot. Glide. Turn. Cut.

The sword broke halfway through the final spiral.

But for a brief instant—he saw it.

A trail of Qi lingering like dew in the moonlight.

A line in the air so delicate, it could pierce steel.

He inhaled deeply.

The path would not open to him until he walked it with the right blade

❧

The next morning, Jian stood at the summit path where the winds never ceased, the Petal Breeze scroll tucked carefully within his robes.

The memory of shattered blades haunted his every breath.

He knew now: only the Heavenfall Iron could become the Whispering Steel.

And for that, he would need to forge a sword unlike any other.

He needed the Phoenix Ash.

He needed Soulbound Silksteel.

And he needed to unlock the Heart Flame within.

There was no other path.

With the fragment of Heavenfall Iron secured in a sealed ironwood box upon his back, Jian made his way to the Summit Hall to find Xiao Ruhai.

Xiao Ruhai stood alone on the wide terrace of the Summit Hall, gazing into the distant mountains where clouds gathered like coiled dragons. The Master of Sword Valley, clad in a long robe embroidered with flowing sword embroidery, didn’t turn as Jian approached.

But he spoke.

“You’ve decided, haven’t you?”

Jian knelt beside him, the box on his back like an anchor to his fate.

“Yes, Master. I wish to search for the Phoenix Ash and the Silksteel of the Mistwoven Peaks. I want to forge my sword. I want to walk the Whispering Steel path.”

Xiao Ruhai turned then. His gaze, ever distant, now settled sharply on Jian.

“You do not chase power lightly. Good.”

He moved his sleeve, revealing a small leather-bound scroll. The leather was aged, bound with sword-shaped clasps.

He extended it to Jian.

“This is the Sword Heart Sutra. It is not a sword technique—it is a forge for your soul. Within it lie the principles of awakening the Heart Flame, the essence every true swordsmith must one day face. Without it, you will never temper the Phoenix Ash. Nor will the Heavenfall Iron ever awaken.”

Jian accepted it with reverence. The scroll pulsed faintly in his hands, as if weighing his worth.

“Do not misuse it,” Xiao Ruhai added, eyes narrowing. “It has led some to greatness... and others to ruin.”

Then, silence fell between them—a silence not of uncertainty, but of two men understanding the gravity of the journey ahead.

That night, Jian returned to the forge.

For the last time in Sword Valley, he forged a blade.

Not the Heavenfall Iron. Not Whispering Steel.

But a sharp Dao sword, balanced and durable—meant not for mastery, but for survival.

He quenched it beneath the light of the moon, hammer ringing like a farewell bell.

It bore no name.

It needed none.

Dawn came gently. Sword Valley’s mist rolled across the courtyards and distant peaks.

Disciples trained below.

Luo Yue watched him from a terrace, arms folded, expression unreadable.

Bai Qingsong clasped his shoulder before letting him go with a grin.

Elder Mo Cang gave him a wooden vial of forged tonic with a quiet nod.

“For broken bones. Try not to need it.”

Finally, Jian turned back toward the Summit. Xiao Ruhai stood there once more, robes in the wind.

“When you return,” the Valley Master said, “let it be not as a disciple… but as a swordsman.”

Jian bowed deeply.

Then walked past the stone arch of Sword Valley’s gate.

The Petal Breeze scroll lay tucked in his pack.

The Heavenfall Iron rested sealed against his spine.

The Dao sword hung by his waist.

And in his soul… the first flicker of the Heart Flame stirred unseen.

After nearly two years, he descended the valley path not as a wanderer…

…but as one who now carried legacy.

# Chapter eleven

## Tianlu town

The wind carried the scent of steamed buns and horse dung as Jian stepped onto the cobbled streets of Tianlu Town.

It was a town that felt both old and new—where moss crept between bricks and new banners hung in fresh ink. The market buzzed, hawkers cried out their wares, and swordsmen in varied robes passed by with tired eyes or arrogant smirks.

Jian tugged his cloak tighter.

Two years.

Two years since he had last walked among crowds like this, since he had felt the press of a hundred lives going about their day while his had been swallowed by steel and sweat.

He had changed. He knew that.

And he was about to find out if Hu Xiao had, too

“You’ve grown taller. And colder. Are you cultivating sword qi or just your brooding aura?”

Jian froze.

The voice rang out with familiar mischief from behind a hanging string of drying duck carcasses.

Hu Xiao.

The same boy who had once smirked his way through the Verdant Jade Sect’s sparring halls—only now his hair was longer, tied neatly in a topknot, and his robe bore the insignia of a formally recognized outer sect disciple. The once cheeky roundness of his face had narrowed, but his eyes still glimmered with that reckless warmth.

Jian let a rare smile break across his face.

“At least I don’t still sneak up on people like a hungry squirrel.”

Hu Xiao laughed, wide and bright, slapping Jian’s back with enough force to jostle the Heavenfall Iron hidden beneath the pack.

“Come on. You’re buying. I’ve survived on nothing but spiritual roots and boiled fish for two months straight.”

They walked down a narrow street toward a small, two-tiered tea-and-noodle house tucked between a blacksmith’s and a dye shop.

Inside, the air was thick with ginger, oil, and murmurs of mercenaries comparing scars.

They found a table near the window. A wooden screen filtered the sunlight just enough for quiet.

“Two bowls. Plain noodles, extra chili,” Hu Xiao called out to the serving girl, who rolled her eyes at the order but disappeared with a tray.

For a moment, neither spoke. Just the clatter of bowls and the swirl of rising steam.

Then Hu Xiao leaned forward, eyes still dancing, but quieter now.

“You’ve changed, Jian. You feel… heavier.”

Jian gave a slow nod.

“Sword Valley was not what I expected. Not full of martial sages or easy victories. I learned to forge with blood and fire. Broke more swords than I care to count. For a long time, I didn’t even have qi… and then, I did. Strange, isn’t it?”

Hu Xiao tilted his head.

“They say cultivation’s a path through fog. You never know what’s ahead, but the way back always vanishes.”

Jian chuckled faintly.

“I see you’ve been spending time with your sect’s philosophy elders.”

“One in particular,” Hu Xiao admitted. “Master Yun Lian. Strict, but fair. He said I was a flaming tree branch in a storm. Wild and bright, but prone to burning out. So I learned patience. Not much,” he grinned, “but enough to not get expelled.”

Their noodles arrived in wide ceramic bowls, steam rising in aromatic spirals. Jian lifted his chopsticks and took a long bite.

Simple, but perfect.

Warm broth. Springy noodles. A quiet moment to rest.

“I missed this,” Hu Xiao said, voice low. “I missed… friends.”

Jian nodded.

“Me too.”

Outside the window, Tianlu Town bustled on.

But within the wooden walls of that modest inn, two young men who had walked separate paths reconnected—not as boys running from fate, but as swordsmen forging toward it.

The sun was beginning to dip toward the west, casting long shadows across Tianlu Town’s streets. Jian and Hu Xiao had just finished their meal, the quiet hum of conversation around them fading into the background as Hu Xiao leaned forward, his voice taking on a more serious tone.

“Jian, have you ever heard of the Lotus Heart Pavilion?”

Jian nodded slowly. “Of course. Who in the valley hasn’t?”

But Hu Xiao shook his head.

“No, not the rumors. Not just tales of their peaceful gardens and scripture halls. I mean truly heard of what they are.”

Jian leaned back, brows furrowing as Hu Xiao continued.

“They’re not just a sect. The Lotus Heart Pavilion is the largest and most prosperous martial order in all of Xiangjian Valley. Maybe even all of southern Tianyuan. Their territory includes Yunxiu Town—the valley’s largest and most cultured town, a place where wandering sword saints once laid down their scabbards to debate poetry and philosophy.”

Jian raised an eyebrow. “I thought they were pacifists.”

“That’s the image they cultivate. Serenity, balance, scholarly wisdom.” Hu Xiao’s grin widened. “But behind those calm halls is a history soaked in battle. Their founding ancestor, Lady Xin Lian, was said to have cut down six Sword Saints in one duel. The real strength of the Pavilion is terrifying. They just prefer diplomacy to dominance.”

Jian’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “So why bring them up now?”

Hu Xiao leaned in closer, eyes gleaming.

“Because in four months, the Pavilion is hosting the Lotus Heart Tournament—a legendary martial event they hold only once every five years. It’s open to all sword-type cultivators below Sword Master rank, regardless of sect or affiliation. No age restrictions, but no elders or masters. It’s the young generation’s crucible.”

Jian’s pulse quickened. “And what do they gain?”

“Honor, status, invitations to legacy sects. But more than that—prizes. Real ones. This time, they’ve outdone themselves. The final victor will receive:

A manual of rare sword forms, collected from a bygone dynasty.

A spirit-refined sword, forged by Pavilion blade-sages.

And…”

He paused, his eyes locking onto Jian’s like the flash of steel.

“A thread of Soulbound Silksteel—real, certified. Straight from the Mistwoven Peaks, exchanged for a Heavenly Lotus pill two generations ago. They’re putting it up as a prize this year to inspire the strongest.”

Jian froze.

The weight of fate suddenly bore down on him again.

Soulbound Silksteel.

A rare chance—perhaps the only one he’d get—to obtain what he needed to forge the Heavenfall Sword.

He leaned forward, voice low and steady.

“And the format?”

“A seven-day trial. One-on-one matches in the Pavilion’s arena atop the Floating Lotus Platform. Losers are eliminated by being forced off the ring. No killing. But injuries? Common. Brutality? Expected. In the final days, even the Pavilion’s core disciples join. To win... you need more than strength. You need endurance, precision—and will.”

Hu Xiao let the words settle like embers into silence.

Jian exhaled slowly, gaze distant.

Four months.

Four months to prepare.

To step into an arena where every strike could change his future.

“I’ll enter,” Jian said.

“I have to.”

The inn was quiet by nightfall, its soft lantern light casting golden pools across the wooden floorboards of Jian’s modest room. Through the open window, Tianlu Town murmured gently under a starlit sky—vendors packing up their stalls, stray dogs barking in distant alleys, and the hollow clink of someone drawing water from a well.

Jian sat on the edge of his bed, a single candle flickering beside him, casting shadows that danced along the walls.

He held his sword across his lap—not the Heavenfall shard, but the Dao sword he’d forged before leaving Sword Valley. A practical blade. Sharp. Balanced. Strong. Yet it felt… empty. The weapon of someone preparing for battle, but not yet worthy of shaping destiny.

His gaze lowered to the small scroll resting beside the sword. The Petal Breeze Form. The first whisper of a path long buried.

Crimson Petal Descent… mastered to the intermediate level.

Edge-Seeker Realm… finally attained.

By most standards, that alone marked him as a rising talent. When he recalled the beaten, exhausted boy who had dragged logs under Luo Yue’s cold stare, the difference was stark. He had grown. In mind, body, and blade.

But as he closed his eyes, Jian saw something else—

The glint of a curved saber tearing through his father’s chest.

The burning ruin of Zexin Village.

His mother’s blood pooling at the edge of the altar.

The cold, cruel gaze of the masked man who led the slaughter.

Just Crimson Petal Descent?

Just the Edge-Seeker Realm?

No.

It wasn’t enough.

Not when the arena would be filled with ruthless prodigies—some born into legacy sects, trained in ancestral sword halls, bearing mystical swords and spirit flames. Some would wield speed. Others, power. Some would have sword hearts already awakened.

He needed something more.

Something different.

He needed to become the one thing this generation had never seen—

A Whispering Sword.

He reached forward, unrolling the scroll.

The brushwork was delicate yet bold. Flowing. Alive. Describing not movements, but sensations. How to let the body drift like a falling petal. How to become untouchable through softness. How each motion was a question—and every answer was a cut through illusion.

He had tried this form before.

Many times.

And each time, the sword had shattered in his hand—too weak to carry the burden of an ancient intent. His qi had awakened, then dimmed. The Heavenfall Iron remained dormant. He had hoped for a sign.

But now the stakes were no longer private—they were public. In four months, he would step into the eyes of the Pavilion, the sects, and perhaps even his enemies.

“If I want to survive… if I want to win…” Jian whispered, tightening his grip on the sword,

“I need to master Petal Breeze—and break into the Blade Adept realm before the tournament begins.”

He stood slowly.

Not to train. Not to meditate.

But to commit.

❧

The stone courtyard behind the inn was rarely used—just wide enough for sword drills and quiet enough not to draw attention. It was there that Jian practiced each morning, rising before the dawn bell of Tianlu Town echoed over the tiled roofs.

His robes damp with sweat, Jian moved like a dancer caught in invisible wind, shifting from posture to posture with the grace taught to him by the Petal Breeze scroll. His steps were light, turns fluid, the sword in his hand tracing ephemeral arcs through the air.

Only—

Snap.

The blade cracked down the middle as he overextended the final spin.

He exhaled slowly, frustration ghosting the corners of his breath. That was the third blade this week. Cheap steel, hastily forged. He had avoided using the Dao sword he’d brought from Sword Valley—it was too well-made to risk breaking. The weight of it hanging from his hip reminded him constantly of what he lacked.

At the edge of the courtyard, Hu Xiao leaned against the doorframe, chewing a stalk of dried reed with a grin.

“That one lasted longer,” he commented. “But your petals still fall too fast.”

Jian chuckled tiredly. “And you still talk too much.”

Hu Xiao smirked. “I’ve got time. You’ve got stubbornness. Let’s see who breaks first.”

Each morning, Hu Xiao watched silently, occasionally offering comments. He never interrupted. He seemed to understand that Jian’s struggle wasn’t just with the form—but with himself.

❧

It was midday when Jian entered the market to purchase more metal stock for new swords. He wore the Dao sword at his waist today—not intending to use it, but unwilling to leave it behind. It was the last proper weapon he had.

He was examining the edge of a folded-steel billet when a voice behind him piped up, loud and curious:

“Hey, hey! That sword on your hip—who forged it?”

Jian turned to find a young man a few years older than himself, dressed in layered robes of deep indigo and charcoal gray, his sleeves embroidered with tiny silver swords. His eyes gleamed like someone who’d just spotted a long-lost treasure.

He pointed at Jian’s blade. “That’s not local make. Not from Tianlu. And not Verdant Jade either… You forged this?”

Jian nodded slowly. “I did.”

“Hah! As I thought!” The stranger clapped. “Clean grain flow, smooth taper, clear temper line. It breathes intent.”

The stranger stuck out his hand. “Chen An, collector of rare weapons, enthusiast of fine steel, breaker of egos.”

“Jian,” he said flatly, eyeing the eagerness in the man’s grin.

Chen An circled him like a hawk. “I’ll buy that Dao. Ten spirit coins. No—twelve.”

“Not for sale.”

Chen An narrowed his eyes, then grinned wider. “Alright then. I’ll win it.”

Jian raised a brow. “By?”

“A friendly spar. One round, courtyard of the North Pavilion. No blade intent. You win, I walk away. I win, I get to borrow the Dao for a month. Just to study it.”

Jian hesitated, but he felt something stir in his chest.

A test. A measure.

He agreed.

The courtyard Chen An had mentioned turned out to be larger than Jian’s private training spot. A few disciples and townspeople gathered around—word traveled fast in Tianlu Town when steel was involved.

Jian stood with his Dao drawn. Chen An unslung a twin-edged saber, curved like a crescent moon, polished to a mirror shine.

“Begin!” someone shouted.

Chen An came fast.

Jian reacted well—sidestepping with Petal Breeze's early steps, guiding Chen’s momentum past him. He landed a light strike on the shoulder. Not bad.

But then Chen An shifted.

Speed. Force. Precision.

Every movement calculated. Each parry delivered with confidence. His body moved with the clarity of someone beyond Jian’s level.

Within a dozen exchanges, Jian’s arms were heavy.

By the fifteenth, his footwork had collapsed.

And then—

Bang!

Jian’s back hit the courtyard floor with a painful grunt. His blade clattered beside him.

Chen An stood over him, not gloating, but curious.

“Edge-Seeker, huh? Not bad. You’ve got something rare in your blade—but your body hasn’t caught up to it yet.”

Jian sat up, sore. “You’re Blade Adept.”

Chen An nodded. “Three years running. But you’ve got good instincts. If you ever forge something better than that Dao, I want first rights to see it.”

He turned to leave, waving. “Don’t worry. I don’t want your sword. Not yet.”

Later that night, Jian nursed a bruised shoulder. Hu Xiao said nothing at first, just handed him a warm towel.

“Chen An’s strong,” Hu finally said. “But you lasted longer than I thought you would.”

Jian didn’t reply.

Inside his chest, he felt a small ache—but not from the wound. It was the truth.

He was still behind.

Not just in realm, but in unity—between sword, body, and will.

“I need Petal Breeze,” Jian thought.

“And I need a sword that won’t break the moment I get it right.”

❧

The forest clearing outside Tianlu Town had become Jian’s new sanctuary. Quiet, serene, and flanked by towering maple trees whose red-gold leaves whispered in the summer wind. Jian stood in its center, a wooden practice sword clutched in one hand—already splintered at the hilt.

Another broken blade.

Hu Xiao stood nearby with arms crossed, watching. “How many does that make now?”

“Too many,” Jian muttered. “Not enough.”

The days since his defeat by Chen An had been unrelenting. Every failure echoed louder. Every blade he forged crumbled before Petal Breeze’s power. The practice swords broke before his soul could speak.

“Maybe I’m going about this wrong,” he said aloud.

Hu Xiao raised a brow. “You mean?”

Jian unsheathed the Dao sword at his side—the one he had forged back in Sword Valley, the one he’d refused to test. His thumb brushed along its surface, feeling its familiar pulse. “I’ve been holding back. But this sword—this one might listen.”

Hu Xiao stepped forward. “Are you sure? You break that sword, you won’t get another before the tournament.”

“I’m sure.”

He took a breath, stepped forward.

Then did something different.

Instead of starting with Petal Breeze, Jian dropped into a lower stance—the one he’d learned from Bai Qingsong, the one named for autumn’s sorrow and fire.

Crimson Petal Descent.

His blade swept low like falling leaves in twilight. The wind stirred. Red maple leaves spiraled into the air, tracing the shape of his movement.

One step, then two.

Snap, turn, pivot—the form shifted like a flame licking at the air.

But instead of concluding the movement, Jian let the momentum carry forward into the opening stance of Petal Breeze. His body turned, the blade light in his hand, leaves caught in the wind of his steps.

The fusion happened seamlessly.

The wind changed.

Qi surged.

The maple leaves suspended midair began to follow his sword like trailing petals caught in a sacred rhythm. The transition between forms wasn’t just natural—it was meant to be.

The Dao sword vibrated, dangerously.

Please hold, Jian thought. Just once—hold.

He twirled with graceful force, the sword carving through silence like a brush across silk. The leaves spiraled behind each stroke. Petal Breeze bloomed with terrifying precision.

The sword did not break.

Instead, the final movement caused the wind to still, and the swirling leaves settled gently around him—one falling on the back of his wrist, another on the blade’s spine.

Jian stood in silence, breathing heavily.

Then—

The orb inside his martial vessel cracked.

Qi spilled out—not in wild torrents but in a controlled, radiant flow, like sunlight pouring through parted clouds. It spread through his body, lighting his meridians, refining them.

His vision pulsed.

His breath slowed.

His body trembled.

Then stilled.

Blade Adept.

The realization struck him all at once—he had broken through. Not in meditation. Not in stillness. But in motion. In the dance of swordplay.

Hu Xiao had watched it all.

He stepped forward slowly, eyes wide, arms lowered, voice breathless.

“You…” He shook his head. “You really did it.”

Jian didn’t answer right away. He looked at the Dao sword in his hand—still intact but faintly humming. He sheathed it carefully, reverently.

“I think,” Jian finally said, voice soft with disbelief and wonder,

“Crimson Petal Descent was always part of Petal Breeze. Or at least… it prepared me for it.”

Hu Xiao laughed, short and awed. “What even is your path, Jian?”

Jian turned his eyes toward the horizon, toward Yunxiu Town, where the Lotus Heart Tournament would soon bloom.

“I don’t know,” he answered, truthfully. “But I’m starting to hear it whisper.”

❧

The clearing outside Tianlu Town had changed.

Where once the trees only offered a gentle breeze and scattered leaves, now they bore witness to a ritual—a sword dance refined through sweat, solitude, and soul-deep effort.

Jian moved like the wind threading through branches.

Each step flowed into the next, no longer burdened by tension or second-guessing. The Crimson Petal Descent he once fumbled through now unfurled with effortless grace. His sword slashed low, then swept upward in a spiraling motion as maple leaves arced behind his strikes in rhythmic trails.

He was the storm and the stillness.

And then—without pause—his movements slipped into the Petal Breeze.

His foot twisted sharply, his body rotated at an unnatural angle. The leaves followed.

A sudden lateral shift mid-attack—his qi redirected the flow of force through his footwork, allowing him to evade and reposition without breaking form. The technique bent logic, leaving behind an after-image.

Then came a sequence of three repeated steps—an old drill Chen An had once used against him.

He didn’t think.

His body moved on its own.

The sword hummed and met an invisible pattern. Like water learning the shape of a cup, Jian’s sword adjusted to anticipate what came next. It wasn't reaction—it was instinct.

"This is the sword that listens," Jian whispered to himself.

When he wasn't dancing with wind and steel, Jian could be found seated on a mat within the inn room, the Sword Heart Sutra open before him, the Heavenfall Iron shard placed reverently before him.

Each night, after exhaustion wore off, he meditated.

Breathing. Emptying. Listening.

Xiao Ruhai had told him the heart flame was not summoned with brute force, but by resonance. Jian waited for it. Reached toward it.

For a full month he toiled—mentally, spiritually—refining his inner self.

But the flame did not yet come.

Still, he felt closer. Like his soul was leaning against a locked gate, and behind it, something stirred.

❧

The last week before the Lotus Heart Tournament, the town of Tianlu began to buzz with news—disciples from other towns had begun passing through, sect banners flowing behind them as they journeyed to the famed Yunxiu Town, the jewel of the Xiangjian Valley.

One morning, just after sunrise, Jian fastened his blade, wrapped the scroll of Petal Breeze and the shard of Heavenfall Iron in silk, and stepped out of the inn.

Hu Xiao stood waiting by the gate, arms crossed, eyes playful but proud.

“You ready?” he asked.

Jian looked back once toward the clearing, the trees now quiet.

“I am.”

Two young men—one with quiet steel in his step, the other with fire in his grin—set off on the dirt path, their shadows stretching toward Yunxiu.

The tournament was now just a week away.

And the wind… was beginning to shift.

# Chapter twelve

## Petals along the road

The road winding toward Yunxiu Town carved a path through hills of flowering pear and ash trees. Jian and Hu Xiao walked under the mottled light of late afternoon, their steps light, backs straight, their eyes on the far horizon.

But fate had a detour in mind.

A group blocked the road near a stone bridge—five young cultivators dressed in midnight green robes embroidered with coiled silver serpents. Their leader stood before them, arms crossed, a jade ornament glinting in his crown of dark hair.

He looked like wealth, confidence, and arrogance stitched into one body.

“Ah, another pair of wandering swords,” the young man spoke, lips curved in practiced disdain. “Your robes scream peasant sect. Sword Valley, perhaps?”

Hu Xiao’s eyes narrowed. “And you must be a noble brat who never trained without silk gloves.”

The crowd behind the noble laughed, but the leader didn’t. His gaze turned sharp.

“Mind your tone, mud-spattered brat,” he hissed. “You speak to Liang Feiyun of the Northwind Liang Clan—heir to its martial legacy and participant in the coming tournament.”

Jian stepped forward, calm. “Then let your sword speak instead of your tongue.”

Feiyun raised an eyebrow. “A peasant dares insult me?”

But Hu Xiao chuckled, stepping between them. “He’s not insulting. He’s offering you a chance to back down with grace. But I’ve had enough of noble spit.”

Without warning, Hu Xiao drew his blade—a twin-edged sabre forged for speed.

“Pick one of your guards or step down yourself,” he said. “Either way, your roadblock ends now.”

Feiyun’s lips curled into a snarl. “Fine. Shen, deal with him.”

A tall youth with a gleaming hook-blade stepped forth. The duel began in a flurry of motion.

The fight between Hu Xiao and Shen unfolded like fire against wind—Hu's agile footwork circling the larger man's brute swings. The blades clashed in sparks. Shen tried to pin Hu down with wide arcs, but Hu dipped and spun, delivering slashes that carved shallow cuts across the man’s arm and side.

Then, with a blur of speed, Hu vanished from Shen’s left.

A blade flashed, and Shen’s weapon clattered to the ground.

Hu Xiao’s sabre was at his opponent’s throat.

“First lesson,” he said breathlessly. “Don’t insult strangers near a tournament.”

Feiyun’s face twisted in rage. “Enough. I’ll end this myself.”

He stepped forward, unsheathing a cruelly thin straight sword that hummed with suppressed qi. “Come, Sword Valley dog.”

Jian walked past Hu Xiao, eyes steady, voice low. “I’ll handle it.”

Liang Feiyun wasted no time—his form was sharp, practiced, every step that of a noble sect genius. His strikes came fast, thrust after thrust aimed to pierce.

But Jian did not retreat.

He listened.

Then his feet shifted. One step. A pivot.

The Petal Breeze began.

His sword, a dao forged by his own hand, whistled in the air with precise arcs. He flowed like a dancer between attacks, evading without haste, countering with surgical cuts. Maple leaves stirred unnaturally from the wayside trees as qi surged faintly with each motion.

Petal Drift sent him sweeping under Feiyun’s sword, appearing at his blind side.

A shallow gash bloomed on Feiyun’s shoulder before he could react.

Flow Echo activated subtly—Jian’s sword moved before Feiyun did, knocking aside a predictable strike and curving beneath for a diagonal slash across his belt.

The noble stumbled.

Eyes wide. Face pale.

He lunged with fury—only to meet empty air and a final whip-fast slash that sliced the ribbon from his crown and stopped at his throat.

The wind died.

Feiyun stood frozen.

Jian slowly sheathed his dao, the motion fluid, final.

The fallen maple leaves danced once more—some drifting down, some still floating where his blade had stirred them.

“The Whispering Steel,” Jian whispered to himself, “does not shout to be heard.”

He turned, his robe stained with dew and dust, his breathing calm, his aura sharp as the blade on his hip.

Hu Xiao clapped, still awed. “You really became a swordsman, Jian.”

Jian didn’t respond immediately. He looked to the far horizon, where Yunxiu Town lay hidden among blue ridges.

“I’m ready now,” he said. “For whatever lies ahead.”

❧

The path widened at the foot of Cloudreach Hill, the gates of Yunxiu Town spreading open like the petals of a lotus in full bloom.

Jian halted beside Hu Xiao at the crest, gazing down.

“Is that... all one town?” Hu Xiao muttered, stunned.

Yunxiu shimmered under the late morning light, wrapped in drifting fog and a thousand colors. Unlike the modest towns they had passed, Yunxiu was no ordinary settlement—it was the cultural heart of the Xiangjian Valley, and the air itself buzzed with anticipation.

Crimson-tiled roofs curved like waves beneath golden ginkgo trees. Wide stone roads led between towering pavilions, incense coils hung over busy market lanes, and dancers in embroidered silks spun in celebration on polished terraces. Above all stood the Lotus Heart Pavilion, its lotus-shaped dome resting atop a white spire that pierced the sky like a sword tip among the clouds.

Flags bearing the insignias of a dozen sects flapped in the wind.

“The tournament hasn’t even begun,” Jian murmured. “And it already feels like we’re in another world.”

They passed through the outer gates, shoulder to shoulder with wandering swordsmen, masked hermits, sect envoys, and foreign cultivators draped in rich desert silks or frost-born cloaks.

As they entered the Golden Lantern Street, sights unfolded one after another:

The Butterfly Song Inn, where a qin player’s slow melody lured passersby. Rumors spoke that the bard there sang coded truths—secrets of sect politics, lovers turned traitors, and even forbidden techniques, disguised as poetry.

The Floating Petal Market, built over water channels with glowing lotus pads for stalls. Puzzle-keepers challenged buyers with riddles to unlock hidden treasures, and among them were whispered clues to relics long thought lost.

The Celestial Koi Pavilion, a serene garden of moonlit bridges and water pavilions. It was said that beyond the koi-filled ponds, in a secluded clearing, a group of dissident cultivators met under starlight to challenge the sect structure and the rigid path of power.

But these were only whispers.

Yunxiu pulsed like a living organism—every alley had a past, every window might conceal a spy or a legend, and beneath it all, the Lotus Heart Tournament loomed like a mountain none could ignore.

“Over there,” Hu Xiao pointed.

A modest inn tucked beneath a plum blossom tree, lanterns swaying gently above its curved eaves. The Wild Bamboo Lodge—plain but welcoming, away from the main streets.

They stepped inside. A soft warmth greeted them—rice steam, clinking cups, and the aroma of ginger-braised tofu.

“Welcome, swordsmen,” the innkeeper bowed. “You’re here for the tournament?”

Jian nodded. “Just arrived. Two rooms. A meal first.”

Soon they were seated in a quiet corner, a platter of plain noodles, stir-fried mustard greens, and fragrant soup between them. A moment of rest. Hu Xiao slurped loudly, then sighed.

“We made it, Jian. From bandit chases and forge fires to this.”

Jian stirred his broth slowly. “The real trials begin now.”

His gaze lingered on the street beyond the window—where warriors passed in silence, where blades gleamed on every hip. He could feel it.

The petals had begun to fall.

The clatter of chopsticks and the low hum of conversation filled the Wild Bamboo Lodge, a warm contrast to the chill of the noon wind that drifted in through the wooden shutters. Jian sat across from Hu Xiao, savoring the simplicity of a rare quiet meal.

But peace, like petals in the wind, never lingered long.

The inn’s doors burst open with a loud bang.

A group of seven swordsmen clad in sharp yellow robes strode in. Gold thread embroidered twin sabers across their chests, and each moved with a cocky swagger that carried the weight of reputation and arrogance in equal measure.

“Ah, this stinking hole again,” one of them scoffed as he kicked the snow off his boots. “Waiter! Something decent this time, or we’ll feed you your own broth.”

The inn fell silent as their laughter filled the room.

Jian’s eyes narrowed slightly.

Beside him, Hu Xiao leaned in and whispered, voice barely above the steam of his soup.

“Twin Sabers Hall. From Rocky Basin, south of the valley. Arrogant bastards, all of them.”

Jian gave him a look. “You know them?”

“Too well,” Hu Xiao muttered. “They use twin saber styles—loud, brash, always showy. The sect master, Iron Lord Huang Bo, is all muscle and ambition. Thinks he can rule the Valley one day.”

His eyes flicked toward one particular swordsman who stood at the back of the group.

“That one—Tang Fei. He’s different. Dangerous. Unpredictable. There’s a rumor he once challenged his own elder… and left him bleeding in a crater.”

Tang Fei said nothing. He stood calmly while the others laughed and shoved chairs aside, their boots loud on the wooden floor.

But then two of them turned, spotting Jian and Hu Xiao.

“Look at this—pretty boys with sharp toys,” one jeered. “Are we in a brothel or a dojo?”

The taller one strode over, his yellow coat swinging. With a thud, he planted his boot on Jian’s table, nearly tipping over the bowls of noodles.

“Say, outsider,” he sneered at Jian. “That sword on your back looks like it belongs to someone who knows how to beg. Why not bow and ask us for a lesson?”

The other chuckled and leaned toward Hu Xiao. “Or maybe the pretty one will cry when we take his hairpin and tie him to the roof.”

The table creaked as Jian’s hand gripped its edge—but he didn’t rise. Yet.

Hu Xiao stood, voice rising. “You want to fight? We’ll see how far your mouths take you without your arms!”

The mocking laughter was instant. But it faltered when Tang Fei moved.

Slow. Deliberate.

He took a step forward, then another, weaving through tables like a blade cutting through silk. His twin sabers were strapped in an X across his back, hilts curved like tiger claws.

The room’s air seemed to tighten.

Hu Xiao’s earlier boldness cracked into hesitation. He knew those sabers. He’d heard the stories. Tang Fei left only humiliation—or corpses.

He stepped back.

But Jian didn’t.

He stood, calm as still water. The yellow-robed disciple still had his foot on the table, but Jian’s hand moved to his dao—his fingers slowly curling around the hilt.

Tang Fei stopped three steps away, head tilted slightly, eyes sharp and unreadable. The laughter had died.

The entire inn held its breath.

The qi between the two began to surge—an invisible clash, like storm winds meeting mountain ice. Curtains flapped. Cups trembled on their shelves. A ladle fell with a loud clatter behind the kitchen curtain.

Jian began to draw his sword.

Tang Fei’s hand slid to his sabers.

Then—

“Enough.”

A cold, commanding voice cut through the tension like a blade.

All eyes turned.

A swordsman in flowing blue robes stood in the doorway, framed by the light from outside. His hair was tied with silver thread, and a badge of Lotus Heart Pavilion gleamed on his chest.

His gaze locked onto Tang Fei’s without blinking.

“This is Yunxiu Town. No blood shall stain its stones before the Lotus Heart Tournament. Anyone who defies that law… will answer to the Pavilion.”

Tang Fei hesitated, then smirked—but it didn’t reach his eyes.

With a slow exhale, he let go of his sabers and backed off. “No need for drama. Just making friends.”

He turned and sat at a distant table, the tension trailing after him like a ghost.

The blue-clad swordsman gave Jian a long, assessing look.

Then turned and left.

The Wild Bamboo Lodge slowly returned to its rhythm—but the shadow of the clash remained. The Twin Sabers wouldn’t forget this encounter.

Neither would Jian.

He sat back down, letting go of his hilt.

Hu Xiao exhaled shakily. “You… weren’t scared at all.”

Jian didn’t respond.

He stared at his own reflection in the tea. Then at Tang Fei.

“I can’t afford to be.”

The inn’s air was still tense as Jian and Hu Xiao returned to their table. Though no blades had been drawn, it felt as though an entire battle had been fought in silence.

Hu Xiao finally broke the quiet, voice low but urgent.

“That swordsman… the one in blue. You know who that was?”

Jian shook his head. “No.”

Hu Xiao leaned in, eyes wide with a mix of awe and wariness.

“Xu Lihua. One of the senior disciples of the Lotus Heart Pavilion—probably the most famous under the age of thirty in the entire valley. They call him the Autumn Rain Sword.”

Jian’s brows lifted slightly.

“He’s already at the Sword Dancer realm, and his sword, Frostchant, is no ordinary blade. It’s ranked seventh in the Sword Valley’s official weapon roll—crafted with Winterjade Steel and said to sing when drawn. His technique, Autumn Rain Drizzle, overwhelms with a flurry of needled thrusts. Graceful, elegant… and absolutely deadly.”

Hu Xiao exhaled, chuckling without humor. “We were lucky he stepped in. If he hadn’t, you and Tang Fei might’ve turned that inn into a battlefield.”

Jian stared at the door where Xu Lihua had entered and left. He didn’t speak—only held the name in his heart.

Xu Lihua. Frostchant. Autumn Rain Drizzle.

Names like leaves that would not soon fall.

They stood, leaving some silver on the table, and headed for the exit.

And then—

As Jian stepped through the doorway into the bright late afternoon, a soft fragrance caught on the breeze. The scent of peach blossoms, sweet and lingering.

He turned—and time slowed.

A young woman passed by him into the inn. Her robes were a delicate blend of light rose and soft cream, fluttering like silk petals in the wind. Her hair was pinned with a carved blossom, and her eyes—calm and deep as a mountain lake—did not meet his, yet they saw through everything. Her presence was like the fleeting moment between spring wind and falling petals: ungraspable, unforgettable.

Behind her trailed a maid with smiling eyes, who caught Jian’s quiet, stunned expression and suppressed a knowing giggle.

Jian turned as she walked past.

Her footsteps seemed not to touch the ground.

Natural grace.

She vanished into the inn.

Hu Xiao nudged him. “You alright?”

Jian blinked. “…Who was that?”

Hu Xiao gave a small shrug. “I don’t know. But you looked like you saw a sword fairy.”

Jian didn’t reply. He just turned back to the path, hand still half-raised in the air as if reaching for something that had already drifted too far.

They descended from the inn’s stone platform and walked along the beautiful lantern-lit streets of Yunxiu Town. Every corner was filled with color—merchants yelling about jade hairpins, travelers selling cultivation maps, and musicians playing bamboo flutes under cherry trees. Yet Jian’s mind remained distant, caught between thoughts of the tournament, Xu Lihua’s quiet pressure, and the unknown girl’s fragrance.

They arrived at the outer gates of the Lotus Heart Pavilion just as the sun began to dip behind the hills.

The Pavilion loomed like a golden lotus in bloom, vast and proud. Its layered towers spiraled upward like petals of divine craftsmanship, while flowing bridges stretched over serene koi ponds that mirrored the sky. Banners bearing the Pavilion’s emblem—a sword piercing through a blooming lotus—fluttered gently.

A line of young warriors and sword disciples was already forming near the registration hall beneath an arched gate.

A middle-aged attendant sat behind a low marble desk, holding a brush and a jade-stamped roster.

“Name, sect affiliation, age, and realm,” he called aloud with the rhythm of someone who had repeated the line too many times.

Jian stepped forward, voice clear.

“Jian. Sword Valley, outer disciple. Age seventeen. Realm: Blade Adept.”

Hu Xiao followed with his own details, and both were issued stamped registration slips with silken cords to hang around their waists—a mark of eligibility for the Lotus Heart Tournament, which would begin in exactly seven days.

As they stepped back into the courtyard, Jian looked up at the sweeping towers.

He could feel it.

This was no longer preparation.

This was the stage where his sword would begin to sing.

❧

The sun had settled into late afternoon gold as Jian and Hu Xiao wandered deeper into Yunxiu, past gleaming walls painted with immortal murals and bridges that arched over koi-filled canals. The town was a fusion of art and chaos, sword and song—a place where the legends of the past and dreams of the future seemed to collide.

Their first stop was the famed Floating Petal Market.

Nestled at the heart of Yunxiu’s central plaza, the market wasn’t built on stone paths or dirt roads, but on interlocking wooden rafts and platforms drifting slowly across a lotus-strewn lake. The floating walkways rocked gently beneath the weight of wandering customers, the lake water shimmering beneath their feet.

“Every stall here is unique,” Hu Xiao explained. “Some are run by rogue cultivators. Others by craftsmen from far regions. They say even reclusive sword hermits come here in disguise.”

Jian nodded absently, his eyes sweeping across the puzzle stalls—each one a mystery in itself.

There were vendors selling:

Sealed scrolls said to unlock only in moonlight,

Singing blades that vibrated when lies were spoken nearby,

And even an elderly man surrounded by glowing rocks, each one emitting whispers in ancient dialects when touched.

One particular stall caught Jian’s attention—an old woman offered a challenge:

“Solve my petal-fold puzzle and learn the path to a hidden relic.”

Jian moved closer but hesitated. The puzzle’s pieces resembled the rhythm of sword forms—delicate, intricate, flowing. Perhaps another time.

After wandering until night began to wrap Yunxiu in shades of blue and lanterns bloomed along every bridge and doorway, Hu Xiao led them eastward toward one of the city’s most peaceful landmarks—the Celestial Koi Pavilion.

Built over a crescent-shaped pond, its smooth wooden flooring circled around mirror-clear water where enormous golden koi swam lazily beneath drifting lanterns. Thin bamboo curtains danced on evening breezes, and low tables were set under flowering trees that shimmered with subtle light-qi formations.

“Let’s take a break here. They serve sweet wine made from frozen lotuses in the mountains,” Hu Xiao said, grinning.

They ordered a bottle of Snow Lotus Wine and small plates of grilled river eel and honey-glazed buns. As the first cup was poured, Hu Xiao launched into stories, his voice animated with joy.

“I visited Jadehook Ravine—the waterfalls there sing during dawn. I fought bandits near Ironroot Bridge, and I found an old ruin with what looked like a collapsed shrine to the Sword Ancients. Oh! And I saw a duel in Rainwhisper Town between a monk and a dual-saber woman. She was… terrifying.”

Jian offered a polite smile, sipping his wine.

But his mind wasn’t on Hu Xiao’s stories.

Instead, his thoughts drifted like the koi beneath them, always circling back to her.

The girl from the inn.

The peach blossom scent still lingered faintly in his memory, as vivid as if she had just walked past again.

“Jian, you even listening?” Hu Xiao laughed and threw a nut at him.

Jian blinked. “Sorry.”

“What’s gotten into you?”

Jian looked down at the reflection in the koi pond, his voice low and unsure.

“That girl from earlier. I… I can’t get her out of my mind.”

Hu Xiao leaned back, grinning with sudden interest.

“Ahhh. The mysterious sword fairy in pink? Say no more.”

Jian turned his cup slowly in his fingers. “Should I have asked her name? Said something?”

“You? Speak to a beautiful stranger? That would’ve been new.” Hu Xiao chuckled, but his tone softened. “You’ll see her again. This is Yunxiu Town—fate’s playground.”

The koi stirred as a small breeze swept across the pavilion. Jian looked up at the stars faintly peeking through the sky.

He didn’t know what her name was.

But he wanted to.

And something told him—

This wasn’t the last time their paths would cross.

Later that night, Hu Xiao took them through winding backstreets to a quieter, simpler inn hidden beneath a canopy of moonlit sycamores. Cheaper, modest, but clean—with separate rooms and hot water drawn by hand.

“We’ll stay here till the tournament ends. Keep things simple,” Hu Xiao said.

Jian nodded and stood at the window of his room for a while, watching lanterns drift in the night breeze.

The roads of Yunxiu were wide.

But his path, now, was clear.

# Chapter thirteen

## The tournament

The rising sun cast golden rays over Yunxiu Town, but the true dawn was felt not in the sky—but in the air.

It was a dawn of clashing destinies.

For today marked the first day of the Lotus Heart Tournament's registrations—and the streets of Yunxiu swelled with the thunder of countless feet, voices, and sword spirits.

From all corners of the Xiangjian Valley and even beyond, young cultivators had arrived—their robes embroidered in colors of ancient sects, their swords tied in proud knots across their backs, and their auras clashing in invisible bursts.

Jian and Hu Xiao stood shoulder to shoulder on the upper street that wound down toward Lotus Heart Pavilion, eyes locked on the towering complex nestled within an ocean of gently swaying pink lotuses.

Carved into the slope of a hill that overlooked the great Lake Meizhu, the Lotus Heart Pavilion was a masterpiece of grace and power.

Dozens of grand white halls rose in layered steps toward a central tower that glittered in silver and jade. Stone bridges, shaped like petals in bloom, stretched over moats of lotus-covered water, and gossamer silk banners fluttered with each step of the wind—each banner inscribed with poetic phrases from sword legends of old.

Floating stone platforms hovered around the complex—some idle, others carrying young sword cultivators to different courtyards. At the highest point, behind layers of glowing formations, stood the Lotus Heart Arena—a wide circular platform floating in midair, ringed by pale stone railings and runic pillars.

“The entire town watches the finals from there,” Hu Xiao said, eyes shining. “They say the wind above that arena carries every battle song to the furthest edges of the valley.”

Jian inhaled deeply.

There was something… sacred about the place.

Like every sword that had ever been raised in the valley still whispered here.

As they passed under the outer gates and entered the procession line, they noticed many disciples from famous sects:

A trio from the Verdant Jade Sect, robes dyed with mountain green and river blue,

Several women from the Silken Cloud Court, walking with the poise of dancers but the steel of blade saints,

And a sharp-eyed youth in black with silver embroidery—said to be from the Storm Vault Clan, rumored to have lightning qi in his veins.

“You feel it?” Hu Xiao whispered.

“Every step I take here feels heavier,” Jian said.

“That’s because every one of these people came here to change their fate. Just like us.”

Jian and Hu Xiao followed hundreds of cultivators through the ascending bridges and steps that spiraled up to the main ceremonial courtyard—a vast plaza suspended on a floating platform above Lake Meizhu.

Carved with spiraling lotus motifs, the platform shimmered faintly with formation lines. At its center rose a broad white marble stage flanked by five ornate seats—each radiating spiritual pressure. Sword banners fluttered behind them, catching the wind like dragon sails.

The plaza was already alive with youth: proud sons of noble families, sect prodigies, wandering sword artists, and even cloaked recluses with piercing eyes. Each bore the pride of their sword path, and the hunger to prove it.

A hush swept across the crowd as five figures took their place on the dais.

At the center stood a tall woman clad in flowing robes of twilight blue and white—the Sect Master of Lotus Heart Pavilion, Lady Meilan.

Her beauty was ageless, her demeanor as still as a lake on a windless day. But her sword aura—silent, graceful, and crushing—held even the most arrogant young warriors in check. At her waist hung the legendary Silent Jade, a straight-bladed sword said to echo the very breath of one’s spirit.

To her left sat:

Elder Yue Xiang, a man of serene features and silver hair tied back in a jade clasp. His gaze lingered calmly on the assembled youth, his hands folded in sleeves, yet his spirit was sharp and discerning. Jian instantly sensed that this was an ally of Xiao Ruhai, the kind of elder who weighed potential, not lineage.

To her right:

Elder Chun Mian, clad in rich indigo robes embroidered with phoenixes. His eyes gleamed beneath the shade of a high fan, and his smile never quite reached them. He applauded slowly as Lady Meilan rose, but Jian, watching carefully, caught the flicker of ambition behind his gaze. A power-monger, dressed in elegance.

The remaining two elders sat quietly, watching.

Lady Meilan stepped forward. A hush settled, and even the birds seemed to fall silent.

“Young swords of Tianyuan,” she said, her voice a calm wind that carried to every corner of the plaza, “welcome to the Lotus Heart Tournament.”

“Five years have passed since the last, and the sword paths of our generation now rest in your hands. Here, you will clash not as enemies, but as artists—your blades painting your truth upon the canvas of battle.”

“Here, blood is not spilled in vengeance—but in growth. May your qi resonate, your hearts remain firm, and your steps find clarity.”

She raised her hand.

Lotus petals—real and illusory—burst across the air, trailing glowing dust that shimmered like stars.

“Over the next seven days, you will battle in daily matchups. Victory belongs to the one who stands last upon the arena platform. Should your foot fall from the edge, or your sword leave your hand, you are defeated.”

“There shall be no killing. Violators shall be disqualified—and judged.”

She stepped back.

Elder Yue Xiang now approached the front, his tone warm:

“Matches will begin tomorrow. Today, you shall draw lots to determine the pairing sequence. Tokens have been inscribed with your sword imprint. Each token will guide you toward your assigned ring.”

“The rules are simple: Two enter. One remains.”

“No interference. No substitutes. All sword paths are welcome.”

Elder Chun Mian followed with a theatrical bow, voice silkier than needed:

“And let it be known—this year’s prizes are worthy of the heavens. Not only treasured sword manuals and refined core materials, but the rarest among them…”

He paused, watching the excitement ripple through the young warriors.

“The Soulbound Silksteel—a relic of ancient forging lore.”

Murmurs broke out like a tide. Jian’s heart quickened. This was it.

Golden lotus bowls floated into view, each filled with spirit-carved jade lots. The disciples were called row by row, each stepping forward to press their token to a bowl. When Jian’s turn came, he approached with calm steps.

The jade lit up and a number floated into the air.

“Ring 9, Duel 2.”

Hu Xiao drew next—“Ring 7, Duel 4.”

They exchanged looks. Their matches would not overlap—for now.

As the crowd thinned and the elders departed, Jian remained for a moment. Looking toward the high arena, watching the way it glowed in the midday sun.

He felt the hum of the Petal Breeze deep within his sword arm.

It was almost time.

“Let them come,” he whispered.

❧

The morning air was crisp, tinged with faint clouds of mist that rose from the lotus lakes below. Above them, suspended in spiritual formations, the Nine Sword Arenas floated in the sky like islands of stone and glory.

Jian stood at the edge of Ring Nine, not yet a participant, but an observer—eyes sharp, breath steady.

The first match of the tournament was about to begin.

A gong sounded like a thunderclap, and two figures stepped onto the stage.

On one side, clad in yellow and brown with loose twin sabers flashing on his back, stood a young disciple of Twin Sabers Hall—broad-shouldered and snarling, a cultivator at the Blade Adept Realm.

“Zhao Ren,” Hu Xiao whispered beside him. “Third son of Iron Lord Huang Bo. Known for overwhelming aggression.”

Across him stood a serene girl in layered violet, her sword unsheathed and held in a single backward grip—a disciple of Lotus Heart Pavilion.

The elder on duty raised his hand. “Begin!”

What followed was nothing short of breathtaking.

Zhao Ren charged with twin sabers gleaming like mirrored lightning, spinning and crashing like a storm. But the Lotus Heart disciple did not retreat—she swayed like wind against the tide, her steps drawing ephemeral lotus blossoms with every shift.

“That’s Ripple Veil, a defensive stance of Lotus Heart Pavilion,” Hu Xiao murmured. “They don’t just block—they absorb and redirect.”

The battle ended in less than a hundred heartbeats. The final strike was a single piercing thrust delivered through Zhao Ren’s rising guard—a needle-like movement that mirrored the Autumn Rain Drizzle technique.

The crowd erupted in cheers. But Jian, silent, held the moment inside him.

He had watched. Absorbed. Understood.

He folded his arms.

“Good,” he murmured. “But… I am better.”

His sword forms—Crimson Petal Descent, Petal Breeze, and the beginning foundations of Flow Echo—were not only powerful, but unorthodox. His fighting path was not based on sheer force or polished school drills—it was adaptive, elegant, unpredictable.

And that was what set him apart.

“I see you’re already analyzing their forms,” Hu Xiao said beside him with a grin.

Jian didn’t answer at first. His eyes were already locked onto the next duel.

This one was Hu Xiao’s.

The fiery youth stood with his spear in hand, facing down another Twin Sabers disciple—this one lean and fast, dual sabers glinting like snake fangs. Their qi flared and wind kicked up dust from the ring’s floor.

The duel began.

What followed was not dominance—but dance.

Hu Xiao wasn’t just strong—he was clever. Every saber strike he dodged, he returned with a feint, a jab, a twist of form that threw his opponent off-balance. Jian watched closely. Hu Xiao was mirroring styles, adapting as he fought—like a student of movement, stealing moments to use later.

“He’s grown,” Jian whispered.

And with a final spinning strike that knocked the sabers clean from his opponent’s grip, Hu Xiao stood victorious.

As Hu Xiao walked back to the crowd, breathless but grinning, Jian clapped him on the shoulder.

“You’ve improved,” Jian said.

“Of course,” Hu Xiao panted. “I’m not the only one. You're smiling. That’s new.”

Jian looked back to the arenas, then to the sky where the banners of the Lotus Heart Tournament fluttered in the breeze.

“I’ve seen their strengths,” he said. “I’ve seen what they call genius.”

“And?”

“It’s not enough.”

Jian turned, his hand drifting to his Dao Sword—still unshattered, still glowing faintly with the Petal Breeze’s mark.

“This is where it begins. My name will rise here, Hu Xiao. My sword path—the Whispering Steel—will leave echoes in this place. They think they’ve seen talent?”

He looked back toward the central stage.

“They haven’t seen anything yet.”

Hu Xiao chuckled. “I’ll be watching.”

But Jian’s smile faded as he turned his gaze to the sky.

Beneath his calm, there lay fire.

The Soulbound Silksteel was not just a prize. It was his path forward. Without it, Whispering Steel could not be born. Without it, he could not forge the blade that would carry his revenge.

The faces of his fallen village flickered behind his eyes. His parents. His friends.

He clenched his fist.

“I will win this tournament,” he whispered, low enough only the wind could hear. “I will forge Whispering Steel. And I will find those who destroyed Zexin Village.”

The platform was quiet—eerily so. A tension hummed in the air as two swordsmen faced one another, neither speaking. Around them, the crowd gathered in thick silence, already murmuring about the previous fights—but this match felt different.

On one side, flame-red robes rippled, edged in gold patterns of lotus roots and fire sigils. His blade was curved like a flame-tongue, pulsing faintly with orange light.

“Tian Huai,” a bystander whispered. “Senior disciple of the Crimson Root Sect… an alchemic swordsman.”

A sect built on combining swordsmanship with internal flame refining, Crimson Root was aggressive, methodical, and deadly in prolonged battle.

On the other side stood Jian, clad in dark cloth, his back straight, a single dao sword strapped to his back. There was no sect emblem on his chest, no outward sign of allegiance—only silence, calm, and that unsettling stillness in his stance that some would call… dangerous.

“From Sword Valley,” came another whisper.

“Who is this?”

The elder referee raised his hand. “Begin.”

Tian Huai didn’t waste time—he surged forward with a burst of Flame Qi, twin trails of smoke spiraling from his blade. His first form, Crimson Surge Flash, came fast—a lunging flame strike that ignited the air around Jian’s feet.

Jian didn’t retreat.

Instead, with a flick of his wrist and a step that bent the wind around his body, he shifted right—mid-motion, unnaturally—Petal Drift.

The flame passed harmlessly behind him as he swept his dao low, slicing up with a Jian-style rising parry, blending it with a Zhanjian overhead force chop. It was wrong. It was fluid. It was beautiful.

Tian Huai blinked, blocking just in time.

Their swords clashed again—Tian Huai unleashed his second form, Alchemic Ember Veins, causing his blade to hum with flame resonance. Each strike released a burst of flame pressure, compressing the air with each swing.

But Jian’s footwork was different.

He twisted at impossible angles—his qi spiraled around him like falling leaves caught in hidden wind currents. Each time a flame burst came close, he slid just past it, redirecting the flow with a deflection or step.

Then came his first full counter.

Crimson Petal Descent.

From above, Jian swept downward in a fluttering arc, his blade cutting through the heat like a breeze through summer fire. Tian Huai blocked, stumbling—his defenses holding, but only barely.

Jian didn’t let up.

With a deep inhale, he flowed directly into a new form—his qi gathered as his sword swept low, then upward in a soft arc, trailing invisible lines in the air.

A pause.

Then—Petal-Cutting Breeze.

The wind exploded.

It wasn’t loud—it was soft. But every petal in the ring, every loose leaf from the nearby decorative maple trees, lifted into the air like caught in a slow cyclone. Tian Huai’s robe flared. His flame qi shattered outward, unable to hold form.

Then came Jian’s strike.

A horizontal blade arc, elegant, almost invisible—his dao glowing faintly with white-gold light.

Tian Huai blocked—

But nothing was there.

The blade wasn’t where it should’ve been.

In that instant, Jian twisted mid-air, his footwork shifting in impossible angles again—Flow Echo activated, reading the repetition in Tian Huai’s defense, predicting it—

—and changing trajectory.

The strike came in from the side, not the front. The blade kissed Tian Huai’s side, slicing through his outer robe, the flame qi shattered again.

Tian Huai flew backwards, landing hard on the stone with his saber sliding across the floor.

He looked up. Jian had not moved. His dao was already sheathed.

The platform was silent.

People stared, stunned.

“What form… was that?”

“He changed direction mid-strike! Is that even possible?”

“No… he blended three archetypes—Zhanjian force, Jian fluidity, and Shuangjian rhythm… with a single blade! That’s madness.”

Even Elder Yue Xiang, watching from the elevated pavilion seats, narrowed her eyes.

“That movement… not something Sword Valley formally teaches.”

“No,” murmured Xiao Ruhai beside her. “That’s something he made.”

Tian Huai stood shakily, nodding in respect before walking off the stage.

Jian remained quiet, stepping off the platform, surrounded by murmurs, stares—and silence.

Even Tang Fei, arms folded in the distance, stared at him more intently now.

He had not just won.

He had announced his presence.

“No style… no archetype…” one Lotus Heart disciple whispered.

And somewhere behind them, Hu Xiao grinned from ear to ear.

“That’s my brother,” he whispered.

“That’s the Whispering Steel.”

The moment Jian stepped off the platform, something shifted.

The silence that had followed the end of his match broke into murmurs—then into voices, louder, sharper, urgent. His victory was not just clean—it had been elegant and overwhelming. But more than that, it was strange.

“His sword moved like wind…”

“But the strikes hit like a hammer.”

“What technique was that twist? ”

No one could name his form. That was the most terrifying part.

Tang Fei stood at the edge of the second-floor balcony of the Lotus Heart Pavilion, his hands resting lightly on the carved railing. His twin sabers were crossed behind his back, and his brows were furrowed.

He had watched Jian’s entire duel without blinking.

Beside him, another Twin Sabers disciple leaned in and said:

“It was flashy. But still just a dao user pretending to be elegant.”

Tang Fei didn’t respond. His eyes followed Jian through the crowd below.

“He’s hiding something,” he muttered finally.

The disciple blinked. “Who? Jian?”

Tang Fei’s eyes narrowed.

And then he turned, walking away without another word.

By evening, the name Jian was already whispered between pavilions and courtyards.

In the Floating Petal Market, merchants leaned toward customers and told them about the dark-robed youth whose sword moved like poetry and struck like thunder.

In the Butterfly Song Inn, a wandering bard had already composed a two-verse stanza about petals and flame and a blade with no name.

Even in the quiet, cloistered halls of Lotus Heart’s inner court, a few of the senior disciples paused before going to sleep, wondering who this swordsman was… and which style had birthed him.

Later that night, Jian sat alone at a table overlooking a koi pond that shimmered with moonlight. Hu Xiao had gone to rest, mumbling about dumplings and his match the next day.

Jian remained behind, his meal untouched.

He watched the ripples in the water as the wind stirred the petals floating above. His dao blade rested beside him, wrapped in a cloth that bore faint soot stains from his forging days.

His thoughts wandered.

“That was only the first fight. There are many more. And stronger.”

He thought of Tang Fei’s gaze. He had felt it like a dagger—not of threat, but of recognition.

“I’m no longer the boy running from Zexin Village.”

He closed his eyes.

“I have no sect style. No master beside Xiao Ruhai. No lineage. But I’ve walked the Petal Path. Forged my sword. And found clarity.”

“I am the sword.”

He recalled the first time he touched Whispering Steel—the fragmented blade from his home. He remembered Zexin burning. His father’s eyes as he bled in the rubble. His mother’s hand falling limp.

And he remembered the feeling from earlier that day—the moment when Flow Echo activated, when the opponent’s guard fell apart without him thinking, when his blade moved before his mind did.

He gripped the sword’s hilt and opened his eyes.

They burned quietly—not with flame, but with will.

The wind stirred, and a single maple petal landed beside his tea.

The tournament had only begun.

And his name was no longer silent.

# Chapter fourteen

## The tournament continues

The sun was past its apex. Shadows grew longer across the dueling platform at the heart of the Lotus Heart Pavilion. Cries of awe and roars of cheers filled the afternoon air as more matches passed, each a clash of techniques and wills.

Some fights were fast and brutal. Others, prolonged chess matches of movement and restraint.

But all of them were preludes.

Because everyone was waiting for one thing:

Jian’s next match.

❧

The announcer called her name in a calm tone:

“Verdant Jade Sect’s Zhao Qiuyue.”

From behind the curtains of silk and smoke stepped a young woman clad in soft green robes, her steps like wind brushing across moss. Her eyes barely met the crowd, and her hands never touched the hilt of her blade until she reached the center.

“She doesn’t look like a fighter,” someone whispered.

“She’s Verdant Jade’s second-ranked. Her Shadow Leaf Style is terrifying. You won’t see it coming until it’s too late.”

Jian stepped up opposite her. His dao was already drawn—not in challenge, but in readiness.

Hu Xiao, seated above, leaned forward, brows furrowed.

“She never even lost in our sect trials…”

The moment the bell tolled, Zhao Qiuyue vanished.

Zhao Qiuyue moved like a whisper.

Her blade danced—a thin, flexible saber curved like a leaf—fluttering in a cascade of short, precise strikes. One became two, two became five. Each slash mirrored the last so closely that they blended together, rhythmically spiraling around Jian like a falling storm.

Her movements were not fast in the conventional sense—there was no blur, no explosion of force—but rather a soft disappearance, as if she had melted into the wind itself.

Dozens of identical slashes.

Each stroke came in at the same arc, the same speed, the same angle—but every repetition flowed smoother than the last, each cut dancing one leaf closer to its mark.

He blocked the first three, dodged the fourth, but the fifth grazed his shoulder.

The crowd murmured. Her tempo was relentless.

Jian frowned—not in worry, but in thought. This was a death by a thousand petals.

Then he smiled.

Her blade was not trying to pierce Jian’s defense.

It was trying to wear it down, strip by strip, breath by breath, until there was no defense left.

He shifted into a rare Shuangjian form—Butterfly Crossing Storm—despite wielding only a single dao. His body mimicked the twin patterns, his qi twisting in opposing spirals.

He parried once. Twice. Ten times. The thirteenth strike nearly kissed his cheek.

The fourteenth he deflected wide—but too wide, opening his ribs.

The fifteenth cut drew blood.

“This is what Hu Xiao warned me about,” Jian thought. “Shadow Leaf isn’t meant to kill quickly—it smothers you.”

“But what if the wind turned? What if the echo changed the song?”

He stepped back once, slid his back foot behind the front.

Then he closed his eyes.

As Zhao Qiuyue advanced with her sixteenth strike, Jian moved—not with intent, but with response. His blade intercepted hers at an impossible angle, like he had memorized the rhythm of her movement.

His footwork followed next—a feint left, then a high twist into Heaven-Slicing Arc, slicing through the pattern with pure force.

She pivoted to strike from a new direction.

His sword was already there.

Zhao parried but her repetition broke.

He followed with a thundering Slash, crashing down onto her guard. The arena cracked beneath her feet as she staggered back, chest heaving.

But she wasn’t done.

Seventeenth slash—her strongest, the edge whispering wind—

She reformed her rhythm instantly. Her sword blurred. Twelve identical slashes tore through the air in quicksilver arcs.

Jian grunted, his arms flaring from each block.

He closed his eyes.

Then something shifted.

His breathing aligned. His muscles remembered. Every movement, every pattern Zhao had made since the beginning... embedded itself into him.

His blade moved—not reacting, but responding. His sword tip deflected each slash before it landed, guiding each away as if dancing alongside it. A ripple, a mirror, an echo.

He twisted his waist mid-strike, Petal Drift blooming into motion—and suddenly his dao flickered like a falling star, veering from its path mid-arc.

This was Flow Echo.

Every repeated movement of Zhao’s became a blueprint. His counter was no longer conscious—it was rhythm meeting rhythm. Qi responding to pressure. Thought responding to instinct.

Zhao’s face paled. Her petals wilted.

She attempted one final surge—thrusting forward with Falling Jade Spiral, a desperate burst technique meant to overwhelm.

Jian stepped around it in a flowing curve letting her overextend. Then, with a deep breath, his blade rose and shimmered gold.

He struck once—precisely where her guard fell—then flicked upward twisting her saber free from her hand.

It flew into the air, landed with a soft clatter outside the platform.

Zhao Qiuyue stood there, panting. Then, eyes wide

A bead of sweat trailed her cheek.

The bell rang.

There was no cheering at first—only stunned silence.

The crowd erupted. Some cheered, others sat stunned. Even among the elite sects, murmurs grew louder.

“Did you see how he countered her signature form without attacking?”

“That was not a style. That was... something else.”

Others muttered darker things. “No sword school teaches such a form. He fights like a possessed demon…”

Jian wiped sweat from his brow. Flow Echo had taken everything out of him—every ounce of calm and control. His core ached from the internal shifts. But he had done it.

From the shadows of the outer pavilion, Elder Chun Mian watched with a frown.

“Too clean… too precise,” he murmured. “That’s not a style passed down.”

Backstage, Hu Xiao threw his arm around Jian and grinned.

“You beat her! The Quiet Blade of Verdant Jade!”

Jian smiled faintly, wiping sweat from his brow.

“It wasn’t easy. She was flawless.”

“But you were better.”

Hu Xiao grinned again, then grew serious.

“Just… be careful. I heard some elders muttering. They don’t like how they can’t place your techniques. One even said it felt like the ‘way of the demons’.”

Jian’s eyes darkened. He remembered Xiao Ruhai’s words:

“Overconfidence is a poison. But so is being blinded by their praise—or their fear.”

He nodded.

“Thanks, Hu Xiao. I’ll be ready for whatever comes next.”

The arena had changed.

The outer dueling stages had been cleared. What remained was the main martial platform, a towering stone dais engraved with patterns of flowing petals and roaring blades. The crowd was larger now, spilling out past the Lotus Heart Pavilion’s gate, buzzing with speculation.

Eight remained.

And Jian—to many, still a nameless outlier—was among them.

Over the past two days, Jian had watched every match with an intensity that unnerved even some elders. He memorized styles.

He even made mental notes of Zhao Qiuyue’s recovery, admiring how she adapted her Shadow Leaf Style with new unpredictable beats.

His own fights were simple by comparison.

Too simple.

Each opponent fell after a few exchanges—overwhelmed by the Petal Breeze, confused by Flow Echo, and broken under the unpredictable fusion of sword archetypes.

Jian wasn’t just using forms.

He was redefining them.

But while he climbed with graceful ease, his brother-in-arms fell hard.

❧

The sky was amber when Hu Xiao faced his nightmare: Yan Tianshou, the golden flame of Twin Sabers Hall.

The battle was ferocious.

Hu Xiao fought like a storm—unorthodox and fierce—but Yan Tianshou’s Relentless Saber Swarm overwhelmed him. Every strike came harder than the last, his twin sabers crashing down like war drums.

One particularly vicious blow dislocated Hu Xiao’s shoulder, and the follow-up kick threw him off the platform.

The crowd gasped.

Jian leapt down to catch his brother before he hit the stone steps below.

Hu Xiao coughed blood and grinned through swollen lips.

“Looks like it’s your turn now… Win it for me.”

Jian looked up at Yan Tianshou, who smirked, spinning both sabers arrogantly.

In that moment, a grudge was carved into Jian’s bones.

But before Yan Tianshou, there was another debt to settle.

❧

“Next match: Tang Fei of Twin Sabers Hall versus Jian.”

This was the match they had waited for: Jian versus Tang Fei, two undefeated contenders. One, a rising anomaly whose swordplay defied tradition; the other, a scion of the Twin Saber Hall, bred for the spotlight.

From the stands came chants of “Tang Fei!”, and petals of red cloth were tossed by younger disciples. Yet a quieter tide had swelled—those who had seen Jian’s strange, shifting sword forms, those awed by the mystery he embodied.

Jian stepped onto the platform.

Tang Fei was already waiting.

Clad in blazing yellow robes, sabers sheathed across his back, the man stood proudly, soaking in the roar of the crowd. He raised both hands high, drawing even more cheers as light gleamed on his twin sabers.

Then he pointed one at Jian.

“You’ve been lucky so far,” he said, voice full of venom. “But this is where your journey ends, outsider.”

Jian didn’t answer. He simply smiled, slowly drawing his dao. The blade shimmered with cold anticipation.

Hu Xiao, from the healer’s bench, winced in pain but muttered:

“Teach him humility… Jian.”

The bell rang.

Tang Fei attacked like a demon.

Tang Fei came forward like a wildfire, both sabers arcing in an X-pattern meant to disorient and split attention. Jian blocked the first with the flat of his dao, ducked the second, and parried the third with a slide-step that gave no ground.

The crowd gasped—he hadn’t flinched once.

But Tang Fei wasn’t finished.

He flowed into River Split Descent, a sabering form that brought both blades in alternating strikes from above and below, closing distance and testing guard patterns.

Jian spun into Coiling Rain Form, his dao flicking up and twisting sideways. But something felt wrong—Tang’s rhythm had changed.

This wasn’t the style Tang Fei had shown before.

One saber spun into Ghost Fang Turn, slicing horizontally while the other looped behind to feint a neck strike. Jian barely ducked in time.

Tang had hidden these variations. He hadn’t revealed them in earlier rounds.

Jian gritted his teeth, stepping back into a wide stance as Tang grinned.

“Did you think I would waste my true forms on trash?”

He’d held back. He’d studied Jian.

Now, in the quarterfinals, he was unleashing the true form of Twin Sabers Hall: Heaven-Crushing Howl, a form designed to collapse defenses through sheer intensity and unpredictability.

Jian said nothing, but his body moved.

He shifted into Jian-style footwork, precise and refined, drawing circles around Tang. Then suddenly Zhanjian aggression—broad, brutal strikes that locked with both of Tang’s sabers.

Jian was driven to the edge of the platform.

A saber sliced his sleeve.

Another carved a groove across his shoulder.

Blood dripped.

“He’s faster… more experienced… and holding nothing back,” Jian thought.

Tang Fei grinned.

“You’re nothing without your little tricks.”

But Jian wasn’t broken.

Not yet.

He slowed his breath. Closed his eyes briefly.

Whispering Steel is not a weapon—it is a path.

His dao shimmered.

Tang Fei came in for the kill—both sabers poised for a cross-shaped cut.

Jian moved.

He slid inward like a leaf on water.

His dao twisted, redirecting a saber, then slicing upward—Petal Drift flaring. His footwork carried him to the side in a blur.

“Zhanjian technique,” someone whispered. “Wait, no… that was Jian style just now…”

Jian began to flow between archetypes: the piercing speed of Jian style, the crashing force of Zhanjian, even the flickering misdirection of Shuangjian—but with one blade.

The confusion mounted.

Tang Fei faltered—just once.

And Jian unleashed Petal-Cutting Breeze.

Qi condensed into a vortex around his blade, his movements smooth, yet sharp like autumn wind. The strike emptied Tang Fei’s defenses, not by force, but by precision, flowing past his parries and clashing into his ribs.

Tang Fei stumbled.

Then came Flow Echo—Jian responded to his next attack before it even came, slashing at the predicted rhythm of Tang’s retaliation.

Metal screamed.

Jian’s Willow petal breeze Form followed—a sweeping arc that reversed mid-motion, slashing across Tang’s left side. The twin-saber prodigy caught it just in time, grunting from the pressure.

Then came the reversal.

Jian dipped low and launched upward with Twin Serpents Coil, his qi spiraling in his limbs. His blade arced twice—once at Tang’s shoulder, the other at his thigh.

Tang barely parried, but his form broke. He staggered.

Jian pressed.

His dao blade shimmered with internal qi. Then came the two Whispering Steel forms he had refined in fire and blood:

Petal-Cutting Breeze: A flourish of invisible cuts, a sweep of wind that emptied the opponent’s defense, subtly displacing the sabers.

Tang’s guard collapsed under it.

Then a crushing downward spiral, like heaven itself bending to press the enemy into the earth.

The impact cracked the arena’s edge. Tang rolled back, coughing blood.

The audience fell into shocked silence.

Elder Chun Mian frowned.

Elder Yue Xiang raised a brow, intrigued.

Jian sheathed his dao.

For a moment, he just stood there, chest rising slowly.

Then he turned, expression calm, and walked off the platform.

Hu Xiao clapped from his seat, despite the pain in his shoulder.

Jian didn’t smile.

He knew Tang Fei wasn’t the end.

Yan Tianshou was next.

And then… the Soulbound Silksteel.

Tang staggered upright, fury in his eyes.

“I won’t lose to you!” he spat.

Then, while Jian relaxed his stance and turned toward the referee, Tang launched a sudden slash to the back—a killing strike forbidden by the rules.

Before steel could strike flesh, a shimmering qi barrier shimmered into existence—Elder Yue Xiang’s palm raised, eyes narrowed in disapproval.

The saber shattered on the invisible wall.

“You have lost,” the elder said coldly. “And you have violated the honor of this platform.”

Tang screamed, sabers shaking in rage. “You think this bastard deserves to win?!”

From the Twin Saber Hall stands, a voice rang out:

“Enough!”

It was Elder Wu Liang, one of the few level-headed men in the hall. “You have brought shame to us. Sit down.”

Tang Fei was disqualified, his name struck from the tournament board.

He turned one last time to glare at Jian, hatred blazing.

“I’ll kill you one day. On a real battlefield.”

Jian did not respond.

The crowd roared, but Jian barely heard it.

The beat of his heart still echoed through his chest like war drums. His breath was steady now, his blade cleanly sheathed, his stance composed—but inside, a storm churned.

Tang Fei’s crumpled form was being dragged off the arena by grim-faced Twin Sabers disciples. His pride shattered, his arrogance left bleeding on the stone.

Jian stood still, eyes lifting toward the elevated pavilions where the sect elders and honored guests watched the quarterfinals from shaded balconies.

His gaze swept past dignitaries.

And then…

He saw him.

A tall figure dressed in charcoal grey and golden trim, his long beard immaculately combed, his arms crossed loosely in front of him as he leaned over the rail. His presence exuded weight—like steel hidden beneath silk.

His eyes… cold, sharp, and patient.

Jian’s heart stopped.

Lan Kui.

He recognized that face—not from ceremony or tournament records—but from the smoke and blood of a nightmare long past.

The night Zexin Village burned.

The masked silhouette watching it all from the hillside.

The voice that ordered the relic to be found.

The aura of death that made even killers fall silent in his presence.

Unmistakable.

Unforgivable.

His fingers clenched around the edge of his robe. His breath trembled—not from fear, but from the slow rising tide of wrath beneath the surface.

“He’s here…”

The one behind it all. The one who destroyed my home. The one who killed my family.

The cheers faded. The arena blurred.

He saw the flames again. His mother screaming. The edge of Lan Kui’s saber catching light as it came down on their home.

His fists clenched. His breath trembled.

Lan Kui did not recognize him. His gaze was only filled with contempt for the boy who had shamed his nephew.

But Jian’s gaze burned hotter. His rage older. Deeper.

As the elder looked down, Jian looked up.

One full of arrogance.

The other full of vengeance.

And somewhere inside Jian’s heart, a promise was made—not just to win the tournament.

But to bring down everything Elder Lan Kui stood for.

This wasn’t just a tournament anymore.

It was war.

Jian stepped off the platform as the announcer began calling the next match. The crowd’s cheers followed him, but they felt distant, like wind passing through leaves.

Hu Xiao limped up to him, wincing as he leaned against a railing.

“You did it,” he said, voice a mix of pain and pride. “You actually brought that arrogant bastard down…”

Jian didn’t reply right away.

His eyes were still fixed on the balcony above, now partially veiled by fluttering silks.

“Hu Xiao,” he said finally, voice low.

“What do you know about Lan Kui?”

Hu Xiao blinked, surprised.

“One of the elders of Twin Sabers Hall. Rumors say he controls the inner factions. Not much of a public figure. But dangerous. Ambitious. Why?”

Jian said nothing.

His hand brushed the hilt of his dao sword, Whispering Steel, and he whispered only to himself:

“I found you at last.”

❧

The candlelight flickered low in the private chamber behind the tournament pavilion.

Walls of fine silk and lacquered wood filtered the cheers from the arena into muffled echoes—distant, like the last cries of an empire collapsing.

Two men sat across from one another at a low table, tea untouched. Between them lay a map of Xiangjian Valley, painted in delicate ink strokes.

Iron Lord Huang Bo, hulking and sharp-eyed, stroked his beard. His golden shoulder guards gleamed faintly in the low light. Across from him sat Lan Kui, tall and composed, dressed in ceremonial gray and gold robes—but his face was sharp, and there was no warmth in his gaze.

He moved a single chess piece on the board set beside the map. The piece bore the crest of Twin Sabers Hall.

“He’s not part of the game,” Lan Kui said quietly.

Huang Bo grunted. “Then why’s he playing it like a seasoned hand?”

Lan Kui didn’t smile. His voice was low, a controlled stream beneath the still surface.

“That boy… Jian. The one with the dao sword.”

“Mm.” Huang Bo’s eyes narrowed. “He cut down Tang Fei. Not even a proper sect disciple, and yet he wields those techniques like they’re extensions of breath. My people say no one’s sure what archetype he follows.”

“Because he doesn’t follow one,” Lan Kui replied.

A silence passed between them, taut and measured.

Huang Bo drummed his fingers on the table.

Lan Kui looked back at the map. His fingers hovered over Yunxiu Town, then slid south toward Snowpine Ridge.

“Sword Valley is weakened.”

“But Jian… if we let him rise—”

“He could become a banner.” Huang Bo scowled. “And banners inspire resistance.”

“Or,” Lan Kui said softly, “he could become a martyr.”

The Iron Lord raised a brow.

“after the finals?”

Lan Kui didn’t answer immediately. He picked up a new chess piece—painted white, in the shape of a sword. He held it between two fingers, weighing its significance.

“If he dies then, it will be a tragedy. The valley will mourn a bright talent… and forget what he was chasing.”

“The Soulbound Silksteel stays in Lotus Heart’s vault. The relics we seek remain undisturbed. The Guild forgets the old bloodlines.”

He set the piece down. Off the board.

“No corpse. No legacy.”

# Chapter fifteen

## Hidden blades, silent winds

The stars above Yunxiu Town were unusually clear that night. Jian sat alone at the edge of the garden behind their inn, the sharp scent of peach blossoms lingering faintly in the air—a ghost of the memory that had haunted him since their arrival. But tonight, his thoughts were not on the mysterious girl, nor on his victories, but on the truth he had just learned: Lan Kui was at the Sword Soul level.

He exhaled slowly.

"Sword Soul... I’m still at Blade Adept. And between us is the Sword Intent realm. That alone could take years to cross. And then…"

Jian clenched his fists. The night wind brushed across his face, but the heat inside him stirred stronger. He was no longer a boy. He had fought his way through blood, sweat, shattered swords, and broken pride. He had awakened the first form of the Whispering Steel, the Petal Breeze, and stood undefeated before sect geniuses.

But to stand against someone like Lan Kui?

That was another matter entirely.

❧

Earlier That Night:

Jian moved under the shadows cast by the large paper lanterns hung through Yunxiu Town. The Lotus Heart Pavilion was ablaze with visitors, guards, and laughter, but Jian had no intention of joining the festivities. He had followed Lan Kui’s movement through subtle tailing—Hu Xiao had helped identify the elder’s lodgings earlier.

He waited.

In the dead of night, the window to Lan Kui’s private guest room slid open. Jian stilled his breathing, and through the window crack, he glimpsed two figures: Lan Kui, cloaked in his crimson-stitched elder’s robes, and across from him—Iron Lord Huang Bo of Twin Sabers Hall.

Their voices were low, but Jian had trained his senses. He pressed closer.

Lan Kui: “The boy… Jian. His presence is becoming a thorn”

Lan Kui: “ if he wins the soulbound silksteel… he’ll forge a better blade. And if that happens, the balance in the valley will shift.”

Huang Bo: “You should have crushed Sword Valley when Xiao Ruhai went into seclusion.”

Lan Kui: “That time is coming. We only need the final seal. The xiangjian Guild will fracture, and then, no one will stop our rule—not even the Pavilion.”

Jian’s breath caught. The final seal?

What seal?

But just as he tried to listen closer, his footing shifted—one of the loose rooftop tiles cracked faintly under his foot.

Lan Kui (turning suddenly): “Who's there?”

Jian didn’t hesitate. He blurred backward using his footwork vanishing over the roof’s edge before any guards could respond.

❧

Now, Back at the Garden

Hu Xiao returned with two bowls of steaming tea and offered one wordlessly. Jian accepted it, his mind clearly distant.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Hu Xiao asked quietly.

Jian nodded slowly. “Lan Kui is stronger than we imagined. He’s not just part of the sect… he’s orchestrating something that could destroy the entire valley.”

Hu Xiao’s eyes narrowed. “Then you’ll need to grow stronger. Fast.”

Jian took a sip of the bitter tea, letting the warmth flood his chest.

“I know. To defeat Lan Kui, I’ll need to become at least a Sword Master… which means I must master the second form of the Whispering Steel and forge my true sword.”

“You’ll get the Soulbound Silksteel,” Hu Xiao said. “And I’ll go with you to Baihua Forest to find the Phoenix Ash.”

Jian looked at him, surprised. “That journey could be deadly.”

Hu Xiao grinned. “Then it’ll be more fun.”

They both laughed, though Jian’s expression quickly returned to solemn.

“One more week… and the silksteel will be mine,” he said. “Then it all begins.”

He gazed up toward the Pavilion in the distance, lights glowing like constellations grounded to earth.

I’ll master Whispering Steel’s second form… and I’ll forge the sword that can split the heavens and carve vengeance into fate itself.

The air in Yunxiu Arena felt dense on the sixth day—heavier than before, as if the crowd collectively held their breath in anticipation.

Only four names remained now.

Two fights would decide who stood on the final stage.

And Jian’s opponent was unlike any he had faced before.

“Disciple Leng Yu of Verdant Jade Sect!” the announcer called. “Versus Jian of Sword Valley!”

Jian stepped forward, the edge of his long dao glinting in the early light. His footsteps rang crisply on the wooden platform, echoing out across the hushed crowd.

From the opposite end walked a slender young man clad in pale green robes, his eyes gently closed, and his gaze directed inward. Leng Yu moved with calm, unhurried grace, guided not by sight, but by something deeper.

There was a faint smile on his lips as he bowed lightly toward Jian. Jian returned the gesture.

“I’ve heard of you,” Leng Yu said, voice soft like the breeze. “Your sword dances with many voices. I’d like to hear them up close.”

Jian’s brow furrowed. "Hear?"

Then he remembered what Hu Xiao had said:

“Leng Yu doesn’t see qi—he hears it. Every movement, every breath, every twitch in the current. To fight him is to fight a river that listens.”

The referee raised his hand. “Begin!”

Leng Yu didn’t move.

But Jian did. He advanced slowly, testing with a light feint—a swipe that brushed air.

No response.

Then he stepped again—this time with a heartbeat’s hesitation and cut diagonally.

Still nothing.

He's not reacting. He's waiting for sound…

So Jian switched tactics. He shifted his stance into Petal Breeze, allowing his footwork to draw in a swirl of maple leaves. As he swept forward, the wind from his sword caught the leaves into the air—crackling lightly as they brushed the arena floor.

And that’s when Leng Yu moved.

He exploded forward with Shadow Listening Step, his sword flicking out like a whisper. Jian barely intercepted it with a parry, sparks flashing between steel.

Leng Yu’s blade struck again.

Then again.

Like rainfall—sharp, staccato bursts that flowed with no rhythm. Jian could see that each movement came not from sight, but from sound, from the air vibrating with his motions.

He can hear the breath before the cut. He can sense my step before it lands.

Jian gritted his teeth and retreated.

Minutes passed in clashing steel, in shifting stances. The arena was silent except for the song of blades and Jian’s rising breath.

Jian slowed his breathing.

He stopped watching Leng Yu.

He closed his eyes for just a moment—and listened.

He heard the sway of robes.

The creak of leather.

The faint ping of qi pressing into wood.

The tension before a movement.

He’s not reacting to attacks. He’s listening to intention.

Jian exhaled.

Then, as Leng Yu struck again, Jian moved mid-attack, using Petal Drift—a footwork that twisted his own momentum like a falling blossom caught in the wind. He veered left and came behind Leng Yu in a blink.

Clang!

Leng Yu spun just in time, deflecting—but barely.

Jian didn’t let up. He entered into Crimson Petal Descent, the refined form he had mastered. The maple leaves curled in air, flowing with his strikes. Each step built rhythm—but the rhythm shifted unnaturally at times. Jian intentionally altered it, breaking expectation, confusing Leng Yu’s sense of timing.

“So unpredictable,” Leng Yu murmured. “Like a storm passing through petals…”

Jian’s blade came crashing down, and for the first time, Leng Yu staggered.

He stumbled back, exhaling sharply.

Both men paused.

Leng Yu lowered his sword slightly, his breathing shallow. Jian didn’t press forward. Instead, he bowed.

“You taught me something today,” Jian said. “That there are ways to see beyond the eyes.”

Leng Yu smiled. “And you’ve shown me that unpredictability itself… can become form.”

Then, like dancers performing a final act, the two swordsmen charged.

Steel rang in a final brilliant clash, and the wind burst outward, sending petals and dust into the air. When the dust cleared, Jian stood upright, his blade to the side—Leng Yu’s sword had flown from his hand and now lay quivering near the arena edge.

Silence.

Then thunderous applause.

Leng Yu bowed with respect, sweat beading on his brow. “You deserve to stand on the final stage.”

Jian returned the gesture, and this time he meant it fully.

As he left the platform, Hu Xiao ran to meet him.

“You won,” he said, smiling widely, “but that… that was something else.”

Jian nodded. “He hears things most of us never even notice.”

He looked to the trees where leaves had settled again. The wind had grown still. But something in him had shifted.

I must learn to fight with all my senses… and without them too. The path of the Whispering Steel isn’t just blade. It’s breath. It’s awareness. It’s spirit.

Only one match remained now.

And Lan Kui’s eyes would surely be watching.

❧

Night had fallen over Yunxiu Town, but the lights in Jian’s small inn room flickered and danced with the flames of a single oil lantern. The sounds of distant festival drums echoed beyond the paper walls—cheers, music, the humming tension of a town waiting for the final clash.

But Jian could not hear it.

He stood alone in the courtyard behind the inn, his dao sword drawn.

Each movement of his body was precise.

Each step of Petal Breeze etched the ground with soft imprints, worn smooth from endless repetitions.

The maple leaves scattered in circles with each swing. Crimson, amber, gold.

One last battle.

He had defeated the Crimson Root Sect alchemist, had stood against the relentless shadow of Zhao Qiuyue, had endured the fury of Tang Fei’s twin sabers, and traded strikes with the blind genius of Verdant Jade Sect, Leng Yu.

Yet as the finals loomed, Jian felt the storm building inside.

Not fear.

Not doubt.

But weight.

The weight of need.

He stopped after a flurry of movements, sweat soaking through his training robes. His chest rose and fell heavily.

He sheathed the blade.

Sat down cross-legged on the packed earth.

Tried to clear his mind.

“You’re close, Jian,” he thought. “But not there yet. Not at Sword Master. Not enough to face Lan Kui. Not enough to win if you falter.”

The Soulbound Silksteel was more than a prize. It was the missing piece—the final material he needed to craft Whispering Steel, the blade that would define his path.

Without it, his entire plan—the revenge, the ascension, the path of the sword heart—would splinter apart.

He opened his eyes and stared into the darkness.

He saw flashes in his mind—Zexin Village burning, the corpse of his father collapsed beside his forge, his mother’s pale hand reaching out, the laughter of the black-cloaked invaders, the whisper of a blade in the night.

Then he saw his younger self again, small and trembling.

He remembered the scent of smoke and the bitter cold.

He remembered how helpless he had felt.

And then he saw the blade.

The fragments of Whispering Steel, resting in the ashes.

He clenched his fists.

He had studied every opponent left. All of them elite, renowned across the valley. Among them: Yan Tianshou of the Twin Sabers Hall, the one who had injured Hu Xiao and carried the unshakable arrogance of a tyrant-to-be.

Tomorrow, one would fall.

Jian could not allow it to be him.

He rose again, taking up his sword.

One more time.

He whispered the name of the form:

“Crimson Petal Descent.”

Then stepped into it—not just with his body, but with every thread of will.

The air around him shimmered slightly as the sword swept in elegant arcs, the leaves following, spinning in a slow cyclone.

He moved again.

Then again.

Then shifted mid-strike using Petal Drift.

A second later, he adjusted again—subtle footwork, delicate twist of the wrist—calling forth Flow Echo, tracing the repetition of imaginary attacks and answering each perfectly, unconsciously.

It was a dance now.

Not training.

Not drilling.

Becoming.

When he stopped, the air around him was completely still.

Only one leaf drifted down, slowly—landing on the back of his hand.

He caught it between two fingers and let out a long breath.

The air was crystalline that morning, sharp as a blade drawn under sunlight. A hush had fallen over Yunxiu Town, but it was not silence—it was anticipation sharpened to a fine edge.

Above the Floating Petal Arena, banners bearing the insignias of the Five Sects drifted in the wind.

The arena was packed beyond its edges—disciples, elders, merchants, cultivators, and even unaffiliated travelers from the valley had come to witness this one match.

All eyes turned to the two figures stepping onto the dueling platform.

One was clad in ivory and petal-pink robes, sword resting at her hip, each step as graceful as falling rain.

Jin Rouran.

The undefeated champion of the last three years.

The Pride of Lotus Heart Pavilion.

Bearer of the famed Cinnabar Bloom, the sword ranked fifth in the entire valley.

Her aura was suffocating—restrained but coiled like a snake poised to strike. Her presence quieted even the murmurs of those who admired her beauty.

Behind her, Lady Meilan stood impassively, arms folded. She had not even spoken. Jin Rouran needed no introduction.

On the opposite end of the arena:

Jian.

Wearing no sigil, carrying no title. His robe was plain, his dao scabbard worn, his face still youthful but marked by the storms he’d walked through.

The crowd whispered his name with growing awe and suspicion:

“The rogue swordsman…”

But Jian heard none of it.

He only felt the pulse of the orb deep within his chest. Dormant. Silent. Watching.

The petals scattered at the edge of the platform were still in the air when Jin Rouran vanished.

No sound. No wind.

Only a blur—

And steel sang.

Jian blocked just in time—barely—and was thrown back ten steps, knees digging into the stone.

The audience gasped.

“Silk Slash,” Hu Xiao whispered from the sidelines, trembling. “Even I couldn’t see it.”

Jian moved in sync—Petal Breeze, twisting to deflect the first bloom of qi, then ducking low as a second arc thundered overhead, striking sparks from his dao.

Rouran didn’t relent. Her second strike was already in motion.

One slash became two.

Two became five.

She moved like a phantom through mist, each swing carving petals in the air—blood-red arcs without origin or end.

They clashed again—her blade-dance a storm of disciplined beauty, his counters unpredictable as rainfall on glass.

With sweeping cuts, she drove him across the platform; each hit made the ground tremble.

Jian was forced back, defending with every ounce of perception and footwork. His Flow Echo adapted, but it was slower than her technique. The Petal Drift bought him moments, but not safety.

By the eighth exchange, his shoulder had been grazed.

By the twelfth, his knee buckled.

But Jian held firm. He sent a pulse of sword intent through his Form, dodging a fatal blow and stepping in close. The clash of their blades released a thunderclap of qi that pounded the stone.

Jin's form glowed brighter as she unleashed Rainveil Serenade, a storm of needle-like thrusts that defined her mastery. Jian blocked and ignored his aching muscles. His vision blurred, but his sword felt alive in his grip—an echo of his promise.

Sweat, blood, muscle sacrificed—everything came to a peak when Jin struck a blow that sent Jian crashing to his knees.

Jin Rouran stepped lightly on the edge of the platform, sword pointed directly at Jian’s heart.

“You're strong,” she said, voice soft as falling blossom. “But strength is not enough.”

With a flicker of qi, her sword exploded into a flurry of cuts, like dozens of silken threads slicing from every angle. The Whispering Silk Slash tore through the air in a net of near-invisible death.

Jian couldn’t escape it.

He couldn’t block all of it.

Then—

A memory surged.

Zexin.

His mother’s blood pooling on the courtyard stones.

His father’s body over the forge.

Lan Kui's sneer.

The Orb at his spiritual root, dormant for so long, shuddered.

It pulsed once, like a heartbeat inside a forge.

Then again.

Suddenly—his blood ignited.

A pale orange energy flooded his meridians, not blazing like flame, but rushing like a cold river, precise and slicing. The tendrils of that strange internal force wrapped through his limbs, binding muscle and qi into a single flow.

Jian’s eyes flashed open.

Rouran’s sword came down—

And he parried it with a single twist of his blade, redirecting it with an effortless arc.

She stepped back, surprised. Her momentum broken.

Jian launched upward, blade carving an impossible crescent, shifting mid-air using Petal Drift, and appeared behind her before she could fully turn.

She blocked—barely.

He followed up with Crimson Petal Descent, but mid-sequence he reversed it, unleashing a Jian-style horizontal sweep from a Shuangjian stance—with only one blade.

She staggered.

The crowd roared.

Jin narrowed her eyes, pulling strength for one final strike. She crossed into Blossom Fury's End, swirling petals of red-white qi meant to overwhelm any defender.

Jian parried then stepped behind her silhouette.

His heart roared: "Protect what's lost."

Jin Rouran’s face glistened with sweat. Her footwork, once elegant and untouched, now dragged slightly.

Jian’s blows were faster.

Harder.

Unreadable.

He weaved Petal Drift and Flow Echo, but also struck with Zhanjian heaviness and single-blade ingenuity, defying convention.

Even her Cinnabar Bloom could not keep up.

And then—

One moment.

She flinched.

Jian stepped forward, his blade falling with a Petal-Cutting Breeze laced with refined qi. It cleaved through the last of her defense, and he pivoted with Petal Drift, reappearing behind her in a shimmer of mist.

One final strike.

Not brutal.

Not loud.

But true.

Jin Rouran flew backwards, sword torn from her hand, landing just outside the platform with a breathless grunt.

The platform fell into silence.

Jian stood in the middle. His blade lowered. His chest heaving.

One last petal drifted down, landing on the bruised stone.

The entire valley froze.

Even Elder Chun Mian’s eyes narrowed in disbelief.

Lady Meilan said nothing, but a faint expression moved her lips.

Rouran sat up, dazed, blood at the corner of her mouth—but then she smiled, faintly.

The referee stepped forward.

“Victory goes to—Jian

The crowd erupted.

As they cheered and chanted his name, Jian looked up at the sky, sword still unsheathed at his side.

He had won.

The Soulbound Silksteel was his.

But the journey had just begun.

His true sword still lay unmade.

His enemy still sat in shadow.

The fire in his blood still burned.

❧

The final cheers were still echoing as Lady Meilan herself stepped forward, flanked by the elders of the sect and the other sect representatives.

Jian stood still before her, his clothes torn and blood drying on his arms. She held a lacquered wooden case, deep red and traced with silvery inlays of dancing petals.

“You have no sect. No master. Yet today, the valley bows to your blade,” she said, her voice calm but rich with intrigue.

“As champion, you are awarded the following: the sword ‘Jadebone Wisteria,’ forged by the famed Gong Tu…” — she motioned to a sect servant who unveiled the blade, thin and light as air, wrapped in plum-silk —

“…the Soulbound Silksteel, and the ancient technique manual ‘Heartflow Resonance: Sword Intent Harmonization.’”

There were murmurs from the gathered sects. That manual was long thought lost to Lotus Heart Pavilion’s vaults.

Jian’s gaze moved over the items. He accepted the manual in his right hand, the Soulbound Silksteel in a black velvet pouch in his left. Then, he turned to Hu Xiao, who watched with awe.

“The sword,” Jian said quietly, handing it to his friend, “Take it. You’ve earned it too.”

Hu Xiao’s eyes widened. “Are you sure—?”

Jian only nodded. “My sword… hasn’t been born yet.”

❧

The celebrations had spread into the streets. Paper lanterns bobbed from balconies, and the sound of music and laughter danced through alleyways.

But Jian felt none of it.

He and Hu Xiao walked quietly down a narrow road shaded by willows, the weight of Silksteel heavy in his sleeve, the manual tucked under one arm. Every step away from the arena, every glance behind… a part of him waited for the reprisal.

And it came.

As they turned a corner near an old shrine, five figures stepped out of the alley's mouth like knives from a sheath.

Twin Sabers Hall disciples.

At their center stood Tang Fei, cloak fluttering, both sabers already drawn.

His face was bruised from the last match. But now, it twisted with triumph and cruelty.

“You should’ve known this was coming, Jian,” he said, his voice low and venomous.

“Blame yourself… for shining too bright.”

The four others—brothers in steel—spread out, forming a tight circle.

Jian didn’t flinch.

Hu Xiao stepped forward, fists clenched. “You’re violating sect law—!”

“Sect law?” Tang sneered. “The valley belongs to strength. No one cares about law once the tournament ends.”

He pointed a saber straight at Jian.

“This ends here.”

It happened fast.

Swords flashed like fangs.

The alley flared with light and steel, and blood sizzled on cobblestone.

Hu Xiao leapt forward, disarming one, striking another with a fist so hard the man spun into a wall. But he was outnumbered.

Jian moved like wind through bamboo.

He didn’t speak.

He didn’t yell.

His eyes were still.

The first two attackers lunged — Jian danced through them, parried both in one motion, spun his blade into a reverse Zhanjian form, and cut one across the waist. The man collapsed, screaming.

The second he disarmed with a twist of Flow Echo, and struck down in a clean, merciless arc.

Then only Tang Fei remained.

Their swords met in a fury of sparks.

Tang’s eyes were alight with hatred. His blades were savage, precise, every stroke backed by the venom of humiliation and ambition.

But Jian was silent.

His footwork was subtle, honed by the echo of Leng Yu’s qi-hearing. He shifted mid-swing, flickered through Tang’s defenses, using Whispering Steel’s Petal Drift in a compressed circle.

Tang’s defense cracked.

“You think you matter more than me?!” Tang roared, trying to cleave down.

Jian stepped inside the arc, drew his qi in tight, and pierced Tang’s lung with a single thrust under the ribcage.

Tang gasped.

Jian’s expression never changed.

“No,” Jian said.

“But I matter to me.”

With a final step, Jian turned the blade, and cut Tang Fei down.

The alley went silent.

Only the sound of dripping blood remained. The Twin Sabers disciples fled. Hu Xiao stood panting beside a fallen opponent, bleeding from his arm.

Jian pulled his blade free and stepped back, his chest rising with each breath.

He didn’t feel fear.

He didn’t feel guilt.

Tang Fei had drawn swords. Tang Fei had hunted him.

He had survived.

But even as he stood there victorious, the weight of his breath grew heavier.

“They’ll come for you now,” Hu Xiao said quietly.

“They won’t stop.”

Jian stared up at the sky. Somewhere in the darkness, clouds passed across the moon.

“Let them.”

❧

The corpse of Tang Fei was carried back to the Twin Sabers Hall camp under torchlight, his sabers broken, blood soaking the torn yellow of his robes. His face — once smug, cruel — now twisted in shock and pain.

The camp roared with anger, disbelief, and bloodlust.

Inside the central pavilion, Lan Kui stood silently at the center of the hall, arms behind his back, his cloak whispering with the night breeze. Around him, Iron Lord Huang Bo thundered like a volcano about to erupt.

“Who saw it happen?” Huang Bo’s voice cracked across the room like a whip.

A wounded disciple limped forward, arm in a sling.

“It… it was Jian, the tournament champion. I saw him with Hu Xiao. They were ambushed, but Jian killed Tang Fei himself. He—he didn’t even flinch…”

Silence fell again.

Lan Kui’s expression didn’t change. But his eyes… darkened.

“Then the line has been crossed,” he said coldly.

“No more waiting. Hunt him down. Drag his corpse back to me. Alive if possible. Shattered if not.”

The elders nodded grimly. The order was passed.

And with it, Jian became a target of the most powerful saber sect in the valley.

❧

In a quiet corner of Yunxiu Town, Jian fastened the black pouch of Soulbound Silksteel to his belt and tucked the Heartflow Resonance manual into his robes.

Hu Xiao stood across from him, his right arm bound and bruised, leaning against the doorframe of their modest inn.

“They’ll come for you,” Hu Xiao said softly.

Jian tightened the strap across his shoulder. The crowd’s cheers were now distant memories. In their place: cold wind, steel in the air.

“I know,” he said.

“But I have something to finish before they arrive.”

Hu Xiao nodded, clenching his jaw.

“You’re going to Baihua Forest, aren’t you?”

“The Phoenix Ash is the last piece. Without it, I can’t forge Whispering Steel.”

“Without Whispering Steel… I’ll never reach him.”

Hu Xiao stared at him, and something in his expression shifted — pride, sorrow, fear.

“Then go. But promise me one thing.”

“Come back. Alive. Stronger. With your sword.”

Jian offered a rare smile.

“I don’t plan on dying before I split the heavens.”

They clasped wrists in the warrior’s grip, brother to brother. No more words were needed.

By dawn, Jian had left Yunxiu Town, the mist still hanging low over the path.

He took a less-traveled road through the winding hills — avoiding the main trade routes where bounty hunters or spies from Twin Sabers Hall might linger.

The wind rustled through distant pines, whispering rumors of coming storms.

Ahead lay Baihua Forest, the legendary bloom-hidden thicket where rare beasts roamed and ancient flames were said to slumber beneath petals — the only known place to find Phoenix Ash, the sacred flame component necessary to forge a soul-bound weapon of intent.

And behind him, across the valley, blades were being drawn, scrolls marked with his name, and the word “kill” etched in cold ink.

# Chapter sixteen

## The fragrance of peaches and war

The mountain path to Snowpine Ridge Town twisted between steep ridges and whispering bamboo groves, where Jian traveled under the shifting shade of pines, his hood pulled low and his senses alert. Word of Twin Sabers Hall’s manhunt had already spread. Banners bearing the Hall’s insignia fluttered from hilltops, and search patrols now clogged the once peaceful roads.

As he rounded a bend, Jian stopped short.

A checkpoint. Four Twin Sabers Hall disciples stood blocking the narrow pass ahead, inspecting carriages and travelers. A luxury carriage, dark lacquer with plum blossom inlays, was parked at the side. Horses stamped impatiently. A veiled noblewoman sat inside, flanked by a maid.

Jian backed into the shadow of the trees. His mind raced. He couldn’t turn around—he’d be exposed, and the next patrol might be worse.

He looked at the carriage.

One chance.

He stepped out from the foliage and walked straight up to the carriage door, bowing deeply toward the noble figure within.

“Forgive the intrusion, noble lady. I am… a traveling swordsman who has earned the ire of Twin Sabers Hall. I beg you—please let me accompany you in your carriage past this checkpoint.”

The maid immediately drew a short blade, stepping between them.

Inside, the veiled lady barely glanced up. Her voice was calm, dismissive.

“We do not take passengers.”

“I’ll pay,” he said,. “Please.”

There was a long silence.

Then, soft silk rustling—she emerged, sunlight igniting auburn hair. A single lock escaped her hairpin, drifting over her shoulder like a petal. Eyes colorless—and deep. Diaphanous clothing of pale jade and silver.

“Get in. But if you draw blood in this carriage, I’ll kill you myself.”

Jian bowed again, relief washing through him. The maid frowned but stepped aside. He climbed in, ducking under the silk canopy.

The fragrance hit him before anything else. Peach blossoms. Faint, intoxicating.

He froze.

It was her.

The woman he had seen at the Yunxiu inn. The one who’d passed him like a drifting dream.

She didn’t look at him at first. But she spoke.

“You may call me Zhao Yan.”

The name struck something in his memory, but it felt far away.

The inside of the carriage was velvet-lined and still, the kind of hush that belonged to nobility and assassins alike. Jian sat rigid, his pulse still steadying from the gamble he'd just made.

The air inside was thick—not with smoke, not with tension—but with silence, heavy and charged. Jian kept his eyes down, acutely aware of the weight of his presence here, of the Dao sword he had just traded for temporary refuge, and of the noblewoman whose calm gaze now rested on him.

Moments later, the carriage slowed. The hooves outside softened, and low voices barked in the clipped tones of discipline.

“Identify yourselves,” came the harsh command of a Twin Sabers Hall disciple.

Before Jian could move, the maid beside Zhao Yan leaned out, her voice sharp and commanding:

“Zhu Yao, with Lady Zhao Yan of the Zhao Family. Make way.”

There was a pause. A shuffling of boots.

Then the voice outside changed entirely.

“P-please proceed, honored miss.”

The carriage resumed its gentle motion, wheels crunching gravel as if nothing had happened.

Jian’s eyes flicked upward, but Zhao Yan had not moved. Her posture was effortless. Regal. Dangerous.

Finally, she turned her eyes toward him—calm and curious, but not indulgent.

“Why hide, swordsman?” she asked.

“You clearly have the strength to cut through those lackeys. Why not draw your blade and clear the path?”

Her voice wasn't mocking. It wasn’t condescending. It was… clinical.

Jian exhaled, his hand tightening in his lap.

“Because I have something I must do,” he replied, voice low.

“And for that… I need to stay unseen, unremarkable. Cutting them down would light torches on a road I need cloaked in shadow.”

There was a pause. She tilted her head, assessing—not judging, not prying.

“A wise choice,” she said at last.

Zhao Yan didn’t press further. Instead, she gestured slightly toward the maid.

“This is Zhu Yao,” she said.

The maid looked at him coolly, her discipline soldier-sharp.

Her words seemed to float just above the line of implication. Jian wondered if she was offering him a similar unspoken pact.

Zhao Yan didn’t ask about his origins. She made no move to dig into his identity, though Jian could feel the sharpness in her gaze. It wasn’t ignorance—it was restraint.

She knew he was a man made of secrets.

And right now, she respected them.

The silence returned. Zhu Yao closed the curtain, and shadows played against the silk as the carriage continued its gentle sway.

Jian sat, his back straight but his mind churning. The hush grew unbearable—too many thoughts, too many echoes.

Finally, unable to stop himself, he spoke.

“Where are you from?”

It was simple. Quiet. But it cut through the veil.

Zhao Yan smiled faintly, as though amused by the obviousness of the question—but something in her eyes warmed.

"Beiyan."  
The name fell lightly, almost too casually, yet carried a weight she chose to hide.

She continued, her tone even, as if rehearsed for audiences both friendly and wary:  
"Beiyan lies to the north of Tianzhao, across the Zhongdu Plains. Small, but proud. Its cities are fewer, its armies lighter, yet its people endure. My family, the Zhao Clan, has served these lands for generations, quietly holding what little power we can."

“And you?” she added, not as a challenge, but out of curiosity.

Jian hesitated—then offered the only truth he could afford.

“I’m from a village that no longer exists.”

The look that passed between them was brief, but not empty.

❧

The rising sun painted the rooftops of Snowpine Ridge Town in pale gold, bathing the snowy tiles and stone streets in a glow that softened the ever-present mountain chill. The town, built on ridges and winding steps, seemed to cling to the cliffs themselves like a stubborn climber, clinging to survival and beauty alike.

The carriage rolled to a stop beside a quiet square beneath a red-leafed maple tree whose petals drifted gently in the wind—like faint memories returning home.

Inside the carriage, Zhao Yan gently reached for the curtain while Zhu Yao stepped out first, casting sharp glances in every direction, assessing their surroundings.

Jian remained seated for a moment, hands resting lightly on his knees. The journey had been long, but it had felt fleeting. He had not said much after their brief exchange, though his mind had swirled with thoughts.

“This is where we part ways,” Zhao Yan said softly, without turning to him.

Jian nodded and stood, drawing aside the curtain and stepping down to the frost-dusted stones.

The cold air kissed his face. It felt grounding.

Zhao Yan emerged next, radiant and composed as always. Though no words passed between them for a breath or two, the silence was different this time. It wasn’t tormented, but weighted—with understanding, and with the softest tinge of regret.

He bowed, unpracticed. “Thank you... for the ride—and stories.”

Zhao Yan studied him with a faint tilt of the head, as though he were a piece of strategy too undefined to predict.

Jian’s lips curved faintly, though his eyes did not lose their stillness.

She didn’t answer, only looked at him with an expression he couldn’t decipher—part wary, part curious, and maybe something else, more guarded.

“Your path seems wrapped in smoke,” she said, her voice cool but not unkind. “I hope, wherever it leads… it doesn’t consume you.”

Zhu Yao returned to her side, brushing a speck of dust from her robe.

“And I hope your own path,” he said, “leads to victories you’ve yet to imagine.”

He turned to leave, but paused.

In his heart, he felt the weight of something unfinished—a quiet yearning, not for answers, but for possibility.

“Perhaps we’ll meet again,” he thought.

Behind him, Zhao Yan watched him go, her gaze lingering longer than necessary.

She said nothing to Zhu Yao, but when her maid looked at her questioningly, she finally spoke:

“He didn’t say where he was going,” Zhao Yan murmured.

“Did you want to know, my lady?” Zhu Yao asked.

Zhao Yan’s lips curved—only slightly.

“No,” she said. “Some men carry their storms behind their silence. He’s not someone to follow too closely.”

But even as she said it, her fingers brushed her sleeve absently—where the faint scent of forged steel and pine ash still lingered in the fabric.

And in her heart, she knew she would remember the name Jian Xue.

❧

The quiet buzz of Snowpine Ridge Town was different by night. The late hours chased most merchants behind wooden shutters, and the tavern lights glowed like isolated embers under the weight of drifting mountain fog. Snow dusted the cobbles, light and restless, stirred by winds that whispered through alleys like forgotten ghosts.

Jian walked the narrow backstreets cloaked in a plain, grey robe, the copper buckle on his cloak turned inward to avoid catching moonlight. He moved swiftly, not as a swordsman—but as someone who no longer wanted to be seen.

Behind him, two sets of footsteps.

Subtle. But not subtle enough.

He paused near a butcher’s shop long closed for the night, glancing at the blood-washed gutter. In the reflection of a half-frozen puddle, he saw them—two men, shrouded in shadow, one bald with a long scar down his jaw, the other thin with a curved saber at his hip.

Bounty hunters.

“Don’t lose him this time,” the scarred one hissed.

Jian turned and walked faster. Not hurried, just enough to be mistaken for a traveler seeking a warm bed—not a fugitive carrying the wrath of Twin Sabers Hall.

He ducked into an alley that curved into a maze of walkways, then up a stairwell leading to a courtyard nestled between aging temples. There, beside a tea house long closed, stood a crooked inn with a faded signboard: ‘Pine Smoke Rest.’

Inside, a hunched old innkeeper greeted him with sleepy eyes.

“Room. One night,” Jian said, voice low.

“Twelve liang.”

He tossed a coin onto the counter. The old man didn’t ask questions, only handed him a brass key with a rusted tag.

Jian climbed the creaking stairs and entered his room without lighting a lantern. Only when the door was bolted did he let out a slow breath. He peeled off his outer cloak, sat by the small window, and watched the fog thicken outside like a veil of snow-colored silk.

He didn’t sleep immediately.

He listened.

Sure enough, distant murmurs on the street.

“He’s not in the taverns. Try the upper district.”

The footsteps faded. Jian sat cross-legged on the straw mat bed and closed his eyes, heart steady despite the danger.

He was used to this now.

The quiet of the room wrapped around him, pierced only by the slow drip of snowmelt outside. He drew a breath, cleared his thoughts, and began moving his qi in slow, practiced pulses, preparing his body and mind for what came next.

Tomorrow, he would leave early.

He would head east—through the old pine trails, beyond the foot of Cloudmirror Ridge, and into the deep hidden path toward baihua forest That was where the Phoenix Ash bloomed, where fire and wind met in ancient union.

And that was where his sword’s soul would awaken.

❧

The cold arrived before dawn.

A thin layer of frost clung to the wooden windowpane as the pale morning light crept into Room Seven. Jian Xue opened his eyes before the rooster crowed. For a moment, he simply lay still—listening to the silence, the breath of snow-laced wind outside, and the faint creak of old wood settling beneath him.

He sat up and dressed quickly. His traveling robe was worn but warm, and he wrapped his blade in cloth, strapping it to his back beneath his cloak. The Soulbound Silksteel sat within the inner pouch of his robe, heavy as fate.

As he fastened the last tie of his sash, he paused—hand over his chest, where the orb nestled deep within his martial vessel. It pulsed once, faint and quiet, as though it too knew the journey ahead.

He stepped out into the street. Snowpine Ridge was still asleep, smoke curling lazily from chimneys into the pale-blue sky. His boots crunched softly in the frost, each step toward destiny silent and deliberate.

No one saw him leave.

No one stopped him.

He passed the frozen fountain at the town’s center, the stone statue of a pine maiden now rimmed with icicles, and turned eastward through the merchant road, then off the paved track onto an older, moss-veiled footpath.

The road to Ten Thousand Leaf Grotto was not marked on any map.

Jian moved through twisted pine woods veiled in mist, the silence interrupted only by the occasional flutter of startled birds. The forest deepened, each step taking him further from the world of inns and whispers and nearer to the realm of ancient qi.

By noon, he had crossed three ridges, climbed two icy slopes, and was treading down a narrow trail carved along the edge of a sheer cliff, the mountain face to his left and a drop into white-clouded depths to his right. A single misstep here would end everything.

But Jian did not falter.

His thoughts wandered to Zhao Yan for a moment. Her calm voice, the scent of peach blossoms, the way she never asked questions yet understood too much. Then, just as quickly, his mind shifted—Hu Xiao’s wounds… Tang Fei’s blood…

He pushed the images aside.

He walked faster.

By late afternoon, he reached the pass where the stone markers began—smooth tablets etched with ancient glyphs of forgotten sects, half-covered in moss, their meanings long eroded. They marked the threshold to a place few dared to seek.

Jian paused before the largest of them, pressing two fingers to the sword-shaped character carved deep into the stone:

"Only the one who burns and flows may awaken the flame that does not die."

The phrase from the ancient forging manual echoed in his mind.

A strong wind stirred the canopy above, and a single golden-red leaf drifted down before him—despite all others having long turned to ash or ice.

Jian caught it gently.

Then, without a word, he stepped past the marker and into the valley of legend.

Beyond the stones lay the ruins of Ten Thousand Leaf Grotto—collapsed halls and half-buried pagodas, ghosts of a thousand sects littering the stones. Moss crept up fractured columns; vines wove their way through centuries-old cracks.

Though the sun still lingered in the sky above, the overhanging trees—ancient, sprawling things with bark like coiled dragons and leaves the color of rusted flame—turned the world to amber and gold. Shafts of light pierced through openings in the canopy like lances of fire from the heavens, illuminating slow-drifting leaves suspended in a perpetual autumn.

This place was untouched by seasons.

It smelled of old bark, wind-scattered petals, and something faintly metallic—like steel that had remembered blood.

He moved with reverence.

No birds sang. No insects stirred. Only the gentle rustle of falling leaves and the soft whisper of his boots upon the moss-laden path. Jian found a small clearing near a shallow spring, ringed with stone and sheltered beneath an arching tree whose roots clawed like fingers around a fallen monument.

He lingered by a cracked stone court. Midday light filtered through vine-strewn halls, coating him in greenish glow. He unsheathed his sword and closed his eyes, allowing the ambient qi to soak into his meridians.

He dropped his pack, unfurled his cloak, and began to set camp.

The fire was small. No meat tonight—only dry grains, a few preserved roots, and a trickle of cool water cupped in his hands. As the twilight deepened to burnt orange, Jian stood, unwrapped his sword, and began to move through the Whispering Steel forms.

At first slowly. Then, like flowing water.

His breath stilled.

Leaves scattered around him with each sweep of his blade.

The forms were cleaner now. Sharper.

He could feel the intent surging behind his every motion.

But when he paused—sword held horizontal, breath sharp in his chest—doubt crept in.

Would it be enough?

Could even Whispering Steel break through the gulf between Blade Adept and Sword Soul?

He sat cross-legged by the fire, closed his eyes, and began to meditate.

The dreams came quickly.

They began with silence.

Then—screams. Fire. The scent of burning thatch. His mother’s face, twisted in pain. Tang Fei’s laugh echoing behind smoke. The black-bladed figure again—the one who walked through Zexin’s ashes with no name, whose sword devoured light.

Then suddenly, the whisper came.

“You are not enough.”

Jian turned.

There he was—himself, standing in ruined clothes, eyes cold and empty.

“You grasp at strength, but you will never reach it. You pretend to be a sword, but you are still flesh. Still fear. Still… weakness.”

Jian tried to lift his sword, but it crumbled in his hands like sand.

“You cannot save them. You cannot even forge a blade.”

The world bled red.

A single leaf drifted from above, but as it fell, it caught fire and turned to ash.

Jian screamed—

—and woke, drenched in sweat, his fire now a bed of glowing embers.

His heart pounded like war drums.

He stared into the trees. The dream still clung to him like oil.

But then he sat up, breathed deeply, and whispered to the dark:

“I don’t need to be enough. I just need to be more than I was.”

He reached for his sword the plain dao that had carried him this far—and held it in both hands.

It was still solid. Still real.

He closed his eyes and slept once more.

❧

He rose before dawn.

No fire. No trace. He packed everything into silence and left nothing behind but his footprints in the soft moss.

As the first streaks of pale gold cut through the leaves, Jian turned east, toward the distant silhouette of Baihua Forest, where fire danced among blossoms and somewhere, hidden in petals and peril, Phoenix Ash awaited.

# Chapter seventeen

## Baihua forest

The moment Jian stepped past the last line of moss-clad stones and into the shadow of Baihua Forest, the world changed.

Gone were the vibrant roads of Snowpine Ridge and the comforting chorus of travelers. The forest swallowed sound. A dim green light—neither daylight nor moonshine—filtered through tangled canopies above, dappling the forest floor with ghostly patterns. The air was thick with age and stories, so heavy it seemed to push down upon his shoulders.

Here, time did not flow in a straight line. It twisted. Folded. The trees, ancient and gnarled, towered like the guardians of forgotten epochs. Some bore the scars of lightning and blade, others bled amber tears from hollow knots, and others still twisted unnaturally as if recoiling from something buried deep within the soil. Jian paused beneath one such tree, its roots blackened and pulsing faintly—as though cursed blood still flowed through them.

This was no ordinary place. Baihua Forest was known in the legends whispered through the Xiangjian Valley as both sacred and accursed. It was said to be older than any of the sects, older even than the valley itself. Some called it the birthplace of the swords of old—where the heavens had once fallen as flowers, their remains sinking into soil and becoming steel.

As Jian walked deeper, he passed through what locals called the Divine Glade, where the air shimmered with golden motes that did not move with the wind. Each step he took made the motes ripple away from him in delicate swirls, reacting to his qi. It was a place said to reflect a cultivator’s spirit. Jian’s reflection in the small pond at its center was distorted: his face was firm, but behind him loomed something dark, like a shadow that did not belong.

He moved on.

The Spirit-Haunted Hollows greeted him next. Here, the trees grew tall and thin, their leaves like black velvet. Whispers clung to the air, not from ghosts, but the residual memories of those who had trained, battled, and died within. Jian kept walking, resisting the urge to glance back. He had learned from Leng Yu that not all perception came from the eyes. He listened—to the wind, the rustle of disturbed leaves, the shift of roots beneath the soil.

At twilight, he found an ancient grove wrapped in mist. The trees here had bark that shimmered faintly like jade, and each bore hanging threads of blossom-silk—the remnants of spiritual trees long thought extinct. Jian laid his pack beside a broken shrine of cracked white stone overgrown with lilac moss. It had once been a shrine to an unknown sword deity, its name erased by centuries of wind and rot.

Here, Jian set up camp.

He placed Whispering Steel across his knees and began practicing his forms in silence. Petal-Cutting Breeze. Flow Echo. The blade moved as if drawn by invisible strings, a ghost dancing between glimmers of dying light. He moved not for show, but for control—honing each transition, perfecting each breath. The forest watched, silent.

As darkness fell fully, Jian sat in meditation, letting the world dissolve into stillness.

That night, his sleep was not peaceful.

In his dream, flames devoured Zexin Village once again. But this time, it was not the enemy who held the torch—it was him. His blade was red with blood. A child’s scream echoed in his ears. He turned—and saw himself, older, darker, eyes hollow, standing amidst corpses with a sword crackling like a storm in hand.

“You can’t stop it,” the shadow-Jian said. “You’re becoming what you hate.”

Jian awoke with a sharp gasp, sweat clinging to his skin despite the cold forest air. The fire had gone out. The forest was still. Too still.

He looked at his sword.

“No,” he whispered aloud. “I’m not him. I have a path. I have a purpose.”

He stared into the canopy above, where stars barely filtered through the writhing branches.

“I’ll choose who I become.”

Reassured, he lay down again beside the cold firepit and whispered an old incantation from Elder Mo Cang’s scrolls, one that once brought calm to disturbed spirits. His breath slowed. His hands relaxed. The sword at his side hummed faintly—not with warning, but agreement.

When he awoke before dawn, the mist had grown thicker, crawling along the earth like living silk. The direction to the deeper forest—and the Phoenix Ash—was clear, etched by his will and the pull of fate.

With his blade on his back, he stepped into the deeper gloom.

And the forest closed behind him.

❧

The deeper Jian traveled into Baihua Forest, the less natural it felt.

No birdsong stirred the air. No insects buzzed. Only the faint rustle of unseen things threading through the underbrush reminded him that he was not alone. The mist hung low now, thick like spilled milk, and light filtered down through layers of dense leaves in pale green shafts, turning the world into a painted dreamscape—beautiful, deadly.

He moved with care, whispering his breath in time with his steps, each footfall placed deliberately to avoid snapping twigs or crunching undergrowth. His blade rested loosely in his grip, ready.

Then he froze.

His instincts screamed.

The underbrush to his right held no birds, but the branches above were too still—unnaturally still. Jian had seen this before. In Sword Valley, when the mountain cats hunted deer, the forest quieted like this. He turned slowly, eyes narrowing.

There was no sound. No motion.

Then—nothing.

And then—everything.

A blur erupted from the canopy in a silent leap, fangs bared and claws spread like spears of iron. It was massive—at least the size of a grown ox—and wreathed in willow-green fur that shimmered and warped like mist itself. Its eyes glowed a pale jade, intelligent and savage.

The Willowshade Tiger.

A beast spoken of in quiet tones among sect monster-hunters. Camouflaged so perfectly in foliage it could walk past a dozen cultivators without them sensing it. Able to vanish mid-pounce, using a qi-concealing technique that bent light and sound.

Jian dove to the side just as it disappeared mid-leap. It reappeared in a blur inches from his side.

CLANG!

His dao sword snapped up, parrying the beast’s extended claws. Even so, the force sent him skidding back across wet moss, heels carving trenches into the ground. The tiger landed with terrifying grace, eyes fixed on him with a predatory intelligence.

It roared—not with sound, but with presence. A shudder of qi pulsed outward, shaking the leaves.

Jian’s own aura surged in response. No words were needed. No cry. Just the sound of steel slicing air.

He launched forward.

Their battle unfolded between the trees like a storm of motion—Jian’s blade weaving Petal-Cutting Breeze into a net of flashing arcs, while the Willowshade vanished and reappeared at maddening angles. Once, it blinked into the canopy and dropped from above—Jian barely had time to twist aside, slashing up and opening a shallow gash along its flank.

But it healed—visibly—with glowing threads knitting the wound in moments.

“Qi-regeneration...?” Jian narrowed his eyes. “I have to overwhelm it before it adapts.”

He closed his eyes for a breath.

Then moved.

Flow Echo.

He rushed forward, footsteps spiraling unpredictably, his form appearing to ripple and multiply among the trees. The tiger leapt again—and for the first time, it hesitated mid-air, its perception thrown off. Jian twisted beneath it and unleashed a sweeping upward strike infused with his inner force.

SHEEEENG!

Blood arced across the leaves.

The tiger yowled—a deep, warbling tone that set nearby roots trembling. It landed heavily, one shoulder bleeding. Its camouflage flickered. Jian didn’t stop. He pressed in with a flurry of half-stepped Zhanjian techniques—faint, jagged strikes meant to fracture defense. The tiger reeled, then lunged—

—and Jian vanished beneath its leap.

When it blinked mid-air, reappearing just above where he should have been, Jian was already twisting behind it.

The blade shone.

CRACK!

His final stroke cleaved deep into the tiger’s ribcage. With a howl, the beast thudded against the trunk of a massive banyan, slid down, and lay still—its jade eyes dimming into dusklight.

Jian stood still, chest heaving.

Blood dripped from his blade.

The forest, too, seemed to exhale. A breeze stirred through the trees for the first time in hours, rustling the high canopy like a sigh of recognition.

He did not linger.

Drawing a breath, he wiped his blade, sheathed it, and moved onward—deeper into the heart of Baihua Forest, where the Phoenix Ash awaited.

And with every step, the forest seemed to grow darker… and older.

Jian’s boots sank into damp soil as he trudged forward, each step heavier than the last. The canopy above had thickened until it all but swallowed the sun, filtering daylight into cold, dappled shadows. Every inch of this forest breathed age—primeval and undisturbed—yet not a single sign had revealed itself. Not a spark of flame. Not a feather. Not even the distant echo of wings.

He came to a twisted tree whose roots coiled above ground like petrified serpents. With a weary breath, he sat down at its base, leaning his back against the bark. The silence wrapped around him again, too deep, too complete—like the world was holding its breath.

His eyes flicked up to the branches, half-expecting to glimpse the glimmering silhouette of some celestial beast. But there was nothing. Only moss, shadow, and the low murmur of the wind weaving through ancient groves.

Jian drew in a slow breath and muttered, “Still no sign…”

He pulled out his waterskin and drank sparingly, his free hand brushing the condensation from his neck. The damp air clung to him like fog, yet his limbs ached with fatigue. He had been walking since dawn—an entire day threading his way through thickets, over moss-covered ridges, and around strange, glimmering pools.

Still no nest. Still no Phoenix Ash.

He tilted his head back and stared into the lattice of leaves above.

“Why aren’t there any maps?”

He voiced the thought aloud.

Sword Valley’s libraries had carried a few parchment scrolls depicting the outer fringes of Baihua Forest—none dared claim anything deeper. What he had learned from the scattered records and Elder Mo Cang’s grim tales was simple:

Baihua Forest could not be charted.

Many had tried. Explorers. Cultivators. Scribes and sect historians. Some never returned. Some did—but only with wild stories and strange injuries, their minds fractured. It was said the forest shifted paths, concealed landmarks, even deceived compass-needles. Most believed it was alive, not with mundane flora and fauna—but with a will.

A will older than any sword sect.

“A forest without end,” Jian muttered. “Filled with ghosts, illusions, and beasts born from myths.”

He set his hand over the satchel containing the Soulbound Silksteel. The weight was reassuring, grounding him against the rising tide of frustration.

“How am I supposed to find a phoenix in a place like this?”

His voice was low. Bitter.

He had no direction. No guide. Just a single word passed through generations of smiths: “The Phoenix nests deep within Baihua. Only when the heart is resolute does the flame appear.”

Resolute?

He stared at his palm.

What good was resolve against a labyrinth of shifting trees?

Yet something inside him resisted despair. A flicker of that same stubborn light that had kept him standing through countless battles. That had flared when his village burned. That refused to be snuffed out even when the night was darkest.

“Then I’ll keep walking,” Jian whispered. “Until the forest itself shows me the way.”

❧

Baihua Forest deepened in stillness, the kind of hush that seemed to settle just before something unseen stirred. Jian rose with the first light of dawn, though in this part of the forest, dawn was more suggestion than truth. Sunlight filtered through in pale, fragmented beams—rays caught between thick branches and mist-veiled trunks, painting ghostly shafts of light across moss-covered ground.

He moved silently now, having learned that in Baihua, sound traveled strangely—sometimes echoing in ways it shouldn't, other times swallowed whole. Each footfall was placed with care, each breath measured. His senses had become attuned to the unnatural rhythm of the forest.

And that was when he saw it.

Beyond a curtain of trailing vines, at the edge of a soft glade ringed with silver-rooted trees, stood a creature unlike any he had ever seen.

Its fur shimmered, not with reflective sheen but with an inner glow—soft, argent light rippling like moonlight on water. The Glimmerbark Wolf.

It stood still, alert, head raised as though listening to a sound that did not exist in Jian’s world. Its eyes glowed faintly blue, and with each breath it exhaled a wisp of silver mist that lingered unnaturally in the air. The glade around it felt… sacred. Still. Time did not pass here.

Jian’s breath caught.

“A spirit beast…”

He crouched low behind a thick root and did not move.

It didn’t see him. Or if it did, it didn’t care. It turned its head slowly, ears twitching toward the canopy, its body radiating a tranquil aura—as though it were listening to the forest itself. Every motion was graceful, like it belonged to this land in a way no human ever could.

Then the wind shifted, and the faint scent of camphor and wild iris reached Jian's nose. The wolf’s ears perked. It lifted its snout once, then vanished—not by running—but dissolving into a streak of luminous mist that drifted between trees and was gone.

Jian remained frozen a moment longer, heart steady but alert.

So this is the Glimmerbark Wolf…

He had only read about it in old, cracked scrolls. Said to be one of Baihua’s oldest guardian beasts. Some said they were spirit-bearers, protectors of the glades where ancient qi pooled. Others whispered that to follow one could lead you to an ancestral shrine—or straight to death.

Jian stood slowly and bowed his head once in the direction the wolf had gone.

He did not follow.

Some paths are not meant to be tread by men…

And Baihua Forest, he was beginning to understand, was filled with such crossroads—tests not only of strength, but of restraint.

Adjusting the straps of his satchel, Jian turned and pressed on. The flame he sought would not be won by chasing illusions, no matter how radiant. The Phoenix Ash was still ahead—hidden in a forest that bent to neither time nor reason.

And the forest was far from finished testing him.

❧

The reeds parted with a faint rustle, brittle and long-untouched by human hand. Jian knelt low, sweeping aside the curtain of brush that half-veiled a yawning cleft in the stone. A cave. Faintly he could feel its breath—cool, dry, and ancient. He stepped inside, senses sharpened, one hand resting gently on the hilt of his dao.

The cavern was shallow, no more than a dozen paces deep, but sheltered. Inside, the air smelled of damp stone and something older—smoke-tinged earth and long-faded ash. His eyes caught the faint outline of what might once have been a traveler’s camp: a ring of carefully placed stones forming a hearth, scattered with the ghostly remains of soot; torn, moldering rags—now more thread than cloth—piled in a corner where someone had once slept.

Someone was here, Jian thought, kneeling to touch one of the rags. But not recently… years ago, maybe decades.

He decided it was as good a shelter as he’d find. Outside, dusk was falling fast, and in Baihua Forest, night was not to be taken lightly.

With practiced ease, Jian cleared a space near the fireplace, built a small, quiet flame from dry twigs, and boiled a little water from his skin. He ate sparingly, chewing the dried root crisps he carried in silence. The wind murmured beyond the cave mouth, and the darkness settled like a curtain drawn by invisible hands.

Then, as the stars emerged beyond the trees, Jian unwrapped a tightly bound length of silk from his satchel.

Inside lay the relic: Heavenfall Iron—a narrow, curved shard of blackened ore, cool to the touch, etched with silvery veins that pulsed faintly under moonlight. As Jian set it down in front of him to meditate, a faint glow stirred across the cave wall.

He froze.

Slowly, he turned his head.

Glowing characters—like embers etched into stone—had begun to shimmer faintly in the walls around him, invisible just moments before. The strokes were jagged, old-fashioned brushwork carved directly into the stone itself. Barely visible, until Heavenfall's light stirred them awake.

Heart suddenly racing, Jian tore a strip of cloth, dipped it in oil, and lit it with the fire. Holding the makeshift torch high, he moved closer to the wall.

The characters pulsed gently in the flickering light. Jian stepped closer and began to read.

「破嶽式」

Mountain-Cleaving Form

His breath caught.

The next sequence depicted simple, brutal drawings—silhouettes in motion—each posture shown in crude outline. But to Jian’s eye, the technique was clear: heavy downward strikes, shifting body weight to collapse through enemy defenses; side steps coupled with torque-augmented arcs of the blade; a sequence of footwork emphasizing rooted balance before an explosive launch.

He moved down the wall, torchlight dancing on stone. The writing continued in measured brushstrokes, each followed by an accompanying illustration—detailing breathing rhythm, center of gravity, momentum focus. At the end of the wall, the characters dimmed, as though spent. No more were etched anywhere else in the cave.

A sword form. Buried in a cave like a forgotten prayer.

Jian stood silently for a moment, firelight crackling softly behind him. He raised the torch once more and scanned the entire interior again—no other markings. Just the one form. Deliberate.

Mountain-Cleaving Form. I’ve never seen this in any manuals.

He stared at the Heavenfall Iron lying on the stone, now dim again—its job apparently done.

It responded to this place. Or this place responded to it...

He picked up his dao sword. The weight of it familiar now—solid, honest. He read the characters once more, studied the final posture carefully.

Then he placed the torch into the stone hearth and stepped into the clearing at the center of the cave. The flames cast long shadows. Jian took his stance—one foot back, blade held low across his body.

And began to move.

The cave was utterly still, save for the soft hiss of the dying torch in the hearth and the quiet rhythm of Jian’s breath. He stood at the center, blade in hand, preparing to repeat the Mountain-Cleaving Form.

This time, something felt different.

As he stepped forward into the sequence, a subtle hum began to rise in his blood—faint at first, like a tremor beneath the skin. But with each movement, the sensation grew. Qi flowed more freely, more abundantly. His meridians widened slightly, no longer sluggish channels but swift rivers carrying heat and resonance through his limbs. Each posture of the form seemed to resonate not only with his movements but with his very vessel.

Then it happened.

As Jian drove into the form’s fourth motion—body pivoting, blade rising—he gathered every ounce of focus and dropped his weight in a final, elegant overhead strike, driven by perfect momentum.

The move came not with brute aggression but refined fury, as if heaven’s mandate itself curved through the arc. The blade fell like a descending crane—graceful yet unstoppable, a thunderclap folded in feather and flight.

BOOM—

The torchlight wavered, the air shifted.

Jian landed softly, a single footstep grounding him, the tip of his dao humming faintly inches from the stone floor. He blinked.

What was that...?

He didn’t know how he’d moved like that. His body had followed the form, yes—but it had become the form. Not just learned… awakened.

He didn’t yet realize what had happened inside him.

Deep within his martial vessel, in the core of his spirit sea, the ancient orb embedded within his root trembled—and cracked.

A fine fracture, like lightning etched into jade, split across its surface. No pain. Just a surge of pressure. Power. A deeper connection to the qi of the world. But Jian remained unaware—his focus was entirely on his sword.

He began the form again, this time moving through all ten postures slowly, carefully. But as he neared the fifth movement, the dao in his hands began to vibrate violently.

The blade groaned.

He halted just in time, sweat trickling down his back.

Holding the weapon up to the firelight, he saw the faintest shimmer of strain at the blade’s base—too fine for a crack, but it was clear.

This... this isn’t a normal sword form.

A chill ran down his spine.

No ordinary sword form, no matter how powerful, should threaten the integrity of a well-forged dao.

Then what did I just perform...?

He sheathed the dao, sat down near the hearth, and began to think.

Could it be... this Mountain-Cleaving Form isn’t a standalone technique?

He closed his eyes, breathing slowly. Then, remembering the flow of his own training under Xiao Ruhai, the description of the Whispering Steel’s second form surfaced in his mind. A technique formed from a perfect union of balance, grace, and earth-rending force—a crane descending with thunder in its wings.

“Iron-Crane Descending...”

He opened his eyes.

Suddenly, the memory of the overhead strike returned, crystal clear. The single step. The spiraling drop. The thunder.

It matched everything the Valley Master had once described.

But with a new name. Hidden. Veiled.

They called it Mountain-Cleaving to bury it.

Rising, Jian faced the wall again and traced the characters with the torchlight. The structure… the breath control… even the spiral drop—it was the same.

His heart raced. He had found it.

I’ve found the second form of the Whispering Steel Path.

Testing a theory, Jian drew his blade once more.

He began again—but this time, instead of going straight into the Mountain-Cleaving Form, he led with Petal Breeze, the first form of the Whispering Steel: graceful, flowing like air around flowered steps, each strike light but precise. The wind of a sword.

Then, mid-sequence, he transitioned—an unthinkable shift.

Wind became stone.

He dropped into the descending strike again—Iron-Crane.

It worked.

For a moment, the two forms merged—grace to gravity, wind to earth. Petal Breeze into Iron-Crane Descending. It was incomplete, the final few moves unstable, but the pattern was clear.

Only when he attempted the tenth strike did the blade nearly shatter again—he halted just in time.

My sword… it’s not strong enough yet. Not for this path.

He lowered the blade, panting. Sweat traced rivulets down his arms. His body trembled, not from fatigue, but revelation.

So this is the next step. This is why I need Whispering Steel…

Jian looked down at the dao in his hand, then at the torch-lit cave wall.

He had no master here, no one to guide him.

And yet, the Whispering Steel had whispered to him all the same.

Alone in the cave, Jian bowed slightly—not to any person, but to the ancient will that had left this form behind.

Then, he sat beside the fire once more, and began to meditate.

He would remember this night forever.

❧

The pale light of dawn crept through the dense foliage outside the shallow cave, casting long shadows on the earthen floor. Jian stirred from his sleep, the embers in the hearth now cold. Yet his mind was ablaze.

He rose slowly, drew his dao once more, and stood before the glowing script etched faintly into the cave wall. With practiced patience, he traced each character with his eyes, then again with his breath and step. Every line, every spiral, every pulse of intent—he carved into memory.

When he finally sheathed his sword and turned from the cave, he did so with a newfound purpose. Behind him, the silent cave whispered no farewell—but the mountain-crushing legacy it held now traveled with Jian Xue.

Another day passed beneath the shadow of ancient trees, Jian walking steadily and warily. The atmosphere thickened with every step; the leaves glowed faintly in places, and ghostly lights sometimes flitted between branches, vanishing before they could be grasped.

By dusk, the dense forest began to thin. A sulfuric wind whispered through the leaves. Heat, subtle at first, began to rise from the very ground.

Jian pushed past a dense thicket, and the trees opened into a steep, volcanic expanse—the Scorched Spine, as some ancient scrolls had called it.

A vast volcanic mountain stretched before him, jagged like a dragon’s spine laid bare to the sun. Its blackened slopes shimmered with red veins that pulsed faintly, and sulfur vents hissed from cracks in the stone. Jian wiped sweat from his brow. The air here was dry and scorching, every breath hot in his lungs.

If the phoenix lives anywhere… it must be here.

He climbed slowly, boots crunching across brittle obsidian and char-black gravel. Hours passed. The sun moved high, then began its descent. Still, nothing.

His shoulders sagged. Doubt crept in.

What if it’s not here? What if I’ve been chasing nothing but stories?

He paused, hand on his knee, panting in the heat. The wind shifted.

And then—a shadow passed.

A sudden whoosh of wind stirred the ash, and Jian instinctively dropped flat to the ground. Above him, wings cut across the sky—massive, silent, and gleaming.

He glanced up.

A single phoenix glided low over the mountain slope—feathers gold with streaks of crimson, long tail trailing firelight. Its eyes gleamed like burning coals. It circled once, then dipped toward a craggy outcrop high on the ridge.

Jian’s heart thundered in his chest.

That’s it. A real phoenix...!

He waited for a few moments, breath tight, then climbed—quickly but carefully—along the route the phoenix had taken, keeping his form low, his presence minimal. Each rock was warm under his hand, some nearly scalding. He winced as he climbed a ridge and peered down:

Nestled within the cliff face was a vast nest of charred wood, volcanic glass, and woven silver vines that glowed faintly. The phoenix now sat within it, majestic and still, its plume gently ruffling in the wind.

Jian ducked behind a craggy rock formation, careful not to let his shadow stretch too far. He settled into the stone, sweat clinging to his body as he waited.

Hours passed.

The sun dipped behind the mountain’s edge, and the sky flared orange, then purple.

The phoenix stood. It stretched its wings—light catching along the curve of its golden plumage—and then took to the air with a burst of fire and wind.

Jian moved.

He sprinted forward, cloak tight around his frame, boots silent across scorched stone. The nest loomed before him, and within its deep hollow, he saw it:

Glowing golden ash, glittering with an almost sacred light, pooled like sacred powder within the hollow. The Phoenix Ash.

He reached into his satchel, pulled out a small linen sack, and knelt. Carefully, reverently, he began to scoop the ash—his hands shaking slightly as the warmth of it surged into his fingers.

This… this is what Whispering Steel needs to awaken…

The sack filled quickly, and he tied it off with trembling hands. Just as he stood—

A screech tore through the sky.

The phoenix was returning.

Jian turned.

The wind howled as the majestic beast descended, eyes locked on the intruder. Its cry was not just sound—it was rage.

Jian bolted.

He raced down the slope, ducking and leaping across jagged rocks as heat surged behind him. The air sizzled, fire cascading overhead like falling meteors. But he didn’t look back. Every instinct screamed at him to run faster.

He dashed behind a tall obsidian formation, then slid down a slope of loose gravel and tumbled into the lower forest, smoke trailing in the sky above.

Panting, he crouched beneath a fallen tree, clutching the sack to his chest.

He was alive.

The sky above the Baihua Forest shimmered with golden fire.

Jian remained crouched beneath the fallen tree, breath ragged, heart hammering so loud it nearly drowned out the rush of blood in his ears. Smoke curled faintly through the branches overhead, remnants of the phoenix’s fury. He pressed a hand over the linen sack of Phoenix Ash tucked close to his chest, ensuring it remained untouched, unharmed.

Then he heard it.

The wind shift—a rush of wingbeats cutting through the forest canopy like a drawn blade.

The phoenix.

It circled overhead, casting dancing orange light over the trees. Each beat of its mighty wings stirred the leaves and whispered danger into the still air. Jian could feel the sheer pressure of its qi—ancient, radiant, and furious. This wasn’t the casual glide of a beast returning to its nest. This was a hunt.

Jian stayed absolutely still, his breathing shallow. He flattened himself further beneath the log, surrounded by fallen leaves and old bark. Shadows shifted as the phoenix passed again, its keen eyes scanning below. The air was hot—too hot—its very presence simmered against his skin.

A moment of stillness.

Then another screech—shrill and fierce—echoed across the treetops. The phoenix banked hard, wheeling over the forest one last time.

It hovered for a breathless moment…

Then, with a crackle of flame and a trail of embers, it turned its wings westward and soared back toward its mountaintop nest, a fiery silhouette against the dusk.

Jian didn’t move.

Not until the skies were silent, and even the leaves had stopped trembling.

Only then did he let out the breath he hadn’t realized he was holding.

He emerged slowly from beneath the tree, eyes fixed on the empty sky. The ground beneath his feet was scorched from a near-miss of the phoenix’s wrath, the earth still warm, and some of the nearby branches singed.

Jian looked down at the sack in his hands.

The Phoenix Ash was his.

But the cost of discovery had nearly claimed his life.

That thing… it could burn down this entire forest if it wished. A creature of legend… and I stole from it.

He took a slow breath and tucked the sack safely back into his inner robe, then turned his gaze eastward.

It was time to leave the forest… and begin the forging.

# Chapter eighteen

## The forest’s refusal

The trees loomed taller than before. The light, once dappled and playful, now slanted through the canopy like the teeth of a closing maw. Jian walked in silence, the weight of the Heavenfall Iron, the Soulbound Silksteel, and the warm pulse of the Phoenix Ash tucked safely into his robes pressing against him like sacred burdens. With his dao sword at his side and a purpose forged through pain, he set out to leave Baihua Forest.

But the forest had no intention of letting him go.

It came at him just as he crossed a ridge of fallen bark, roots gnarled like claws and the moss beneath his feet giving way to cracked stone. A violent snort echoed—thunderous—and then the Ironwood Boar erupted from the undergrowth like a felled tree thrown by a storm.

Its hide was layered like aged bark, thick and dark, hardened by decades of wandering the deep forest. Tusked branches jutted from its face, spiraled and gnarled like twisted vines soaked in blood. Its charge plowed through underbrush, tearing saplings from the ground with a grinding roar.

Jian twisted to the side, his shoulder brushing against a tree as the beast barreled past.

Too slow.

The boar turned, hooves tearing through dirt, and charged again.

This time, Jian stepped forward, swinging his blade in a low arc, striking one of the tusks. The impact sent a tremor through his arm—it was like striking a stone pillar. He pushed through the pain and rolled beneath the next swipe of the tusks, slicing once, twice, along its flank.

It bellowed.

Blood spilled—dark and thick like tree sap—but the beast didn’t stop.

Only when Jian leapt atop its back, driving his blade between the armored shoulder blades and dragging it down in a clean line, did the beast finally scream and collapse.

He landed hard, breathing ragged, blood on his arms and a deep gash on his side where one tusk had grazed him.

He wrapped the wound quickly, heart still pounding.

Then the mist came.

A thin red haze curled low along the ground. The trees whispered, and Jian’s vision swam. He stood quickly, trying to retreat, but his steps faltered.

From beneath a shattered root system, the Crimson Root Serpent slithered out—its body veined with scarlet light, its scales bark-like, blending perfectly with the rotting roots around it. Its eyes glowed dimly with a knowing malice.

Too late.

Its tongue flicked once—and with it, a breath of thick red vapor surrounded Jian. He choked, stumbled back, and tried to hold his breath.

But the venom had already seeped in.

The world shifted.

He stood in the streets of Snowpine Ridge Town, blood everywhere. Hu Xiao lay against a wall, his chest carved open, eyes lifeless.

“No…” Jian whispered.

“You failed him,” came a voice. Lan Kui, robes black and flickering with dark qi, stepped forward, a sword buried in Granny Ruomu’s chest. She twitched once and went still.

“No!” Jian turned.

He was back in Sword Valley, only this time it burned—rooftops aflame, Bai Qingsong crushed beneath a collapsed forge.

“Too weak,” the illusion whispered.

He turned again, and now Yun Rou lay on a cliffside path, her flute shattered. Zhao Yan, swordless, faced Lan Kui—but her eyes turned to Jian, filled with betrayal.

“You said you'd protect us…”

The words struck harder than any blade.

Jian screamed, dropping to his knees, the visions swirling like phantoms made of fire and smoke.

But somewhere deep within him, his martial vessel pulsed.

A thread of warmth. A voice. Not a sound—but a memory.

“Steel only sings when struck.”

“If your will falters, your blade falters too.”

It was Elder Mo Cang’s voice.

Jian dug his nails into the earth, breathing hard. The mist thinned—just slightly. He bit his tongue, the sharp pain grounding him. Gritting his teeth, he rose to his feet, blade drawn.

With a swift, wild arc, he cut toward the serpent.

It shrieked, fangs dripping, and lunged—but Jian met it head-on. Despite the blur of vision and the echoing lies in his ears, his sword was steady. A single thrust into its mouth, and a twist of the blade ended it.

The forest stilled.

The haze began to lift.

Jian dropped to one knee, panting, drenched in sweat and blood and venom-spiked fear.

But this time, no tears came.

Only silence—and the resolve of a man who now knew what his fears looked like.

And who had faced them.

He rose, one shaky step at a time, and walked deeper toward the forest’s edge.

Jian half-walked, half-limped through the ever-thickening trees, the day bleeding away into dimming gold and bruised purple. Every step sent dull flashes of pain up his side, where the Ironwood Boar had gouged him. Blood had long since dried into a crust beneath his robes, but the wound still throbbed with each movement—sharp, relentless.

Branches scraped against his shoulders as he pushed through the tangled undergrowth. Somewhere behind him, the Crimson Root Serpent’s corpse lay coiled in rot and fading menace, but its venom lingered in his thoughts more than in his body.

By the time the forest canopy darkened fully, Jian found a narrow clearing nestled between two ancient trunks, their bark twisted like the faces of old sages. Exhaustion clawed at him.

He slumped against the nearest tree and slowly sank to the ground.

His fingers fumbled at the hem of his robe. With a ragged tear, he ripped a length of cloth from it and pressed it tightly against the wound beneath his ribs. It wasn’t elegant, but it would do. He tied it off, exhaling through clenched teeth.

The forest around him crackled with distant rustling—too far to be beasts, too close to be imagined. Above, the branches framed the sky like a lattice of bones. Through them, stars blinked into being, distant and cold.

He stared at them.

For a while, Jian said nothing, did nothing. Just… sat.

The hallucinations still clawed at the back of his mind.

Hu Xiao, lifeless.

Bai Qingsong, crushed.

Granny Ruomu, Yun Rou, Zhao Yan—all of them, fading beneath Lan Kui’s blade.

He closed his eyes.

Was that what would happen if I failed?

He wanted to believe it had only been the venom, a trick of his fraying mind. But he couldn't shake the sense that what he’d seen had been more than illusion. It had been a warning, painted in grief.

The cost of his hesitation.

Of his weakness.

He looked down at his hands—blood-stained, shaking—and clenched them into fists.

"I won’t let it happen."

His voice was barely a whisper, swallowed by the wind.

"I won’t… let it happen."

A firefly danced by his ear. Somewhere in the trees, a nightbird let out a solitary cry—low and drawn, like a flute mourning in the dark.

The pain dragged at his limbs, the wound sapping his strength, but still his heart beat steady. Still, the orb within him throbbed faintly, like a second heart.

He leaned back, eyes tracing the stars once more.

And slowly, almost reluctantly, sleep took him—cradled by pain, shadowed by fear, but wrapped in a vow of steel that no venom could touch.

❧

The sound of leaves rustling in the breeze stirred Jian from his slumber. His eyes snapped open, breath shallow, heart thudding with the sudden sense of danger—but there was none. Just the forest, alive with its strange, eternal whispers.

He sat up fast and immediately winced.

Sunlight filtered through the trees in thick, golden beams, far too high in the sky.

Midday?

Panic briefly surged in his chest. He’d slept through half the day.

Jian exhaled slowly, steadying his breath. Then realization struck him—he hadn’t really slept for days. Not since entering Baihua Forest. Rest had come only in stolen fragments, often with a hand on his sword and one eye open. Even the nights had felt like waking trials, with beasts in the dark and the forest’s presence pressing against his sanity.

Now, for the first time, his limbs felt… heavy, but not from exhaustion—just sleep. A weight he could bear.

He leaned back against the tree and looked down at his side. The cloth he had tied was damp and stuck to the wound. It no longer throbbed, but the skin was swollen and hot. The bleeding had stopped, but he knew infection was close behind. I need medicine. A proper healer.

His eyes lifted to the trees ahead.

“I have to leave this place,” he muttered.

But… where was this place?

He stood, slowly, unsteady at first. His robes were stiff with dried blood and dirt. His hair was matted to his neck. He didn’t know which direction to walk in. But if he stood still, he’d die here—either by beast, by poison, or by fever.

One step at a time.

He started walking, weaving his way through ancient trees that felt more like watchers than flora. Their knotted roots curled like claws across the forest floor, and the thick canopy above offered a patchy sky, its light a broken map.

Hours passed. The forest blurred.

Time lost its shape again.

Until—he paused.

A shape ahead, familiar. Bleached pale. Split in two.

Jian’s eyes widened.

The carcass of the Willowshade Tiger—or rather, what was left of it—lay in the underbrush ahead. Its once-sleek form had been stripped of all flesh, now just bones, gnawed clean by scavengers. Only the head remained, yellowed fangs bared in a permanent grimace.

A cold gust passed through the trees.

But Jian wasn’t afraid. He stepped closer, heart racing—not from fear, but relief.

He knew this place.

This was where he had fought the tiger. The memory came sharply—its near-invisible leap, the way it had vanished mid-air, the final arc of his blade through its neck. He was close. Near the edge of the forest. Hope bloomed like fire in his chest.

The wind shifted, and for the first time in days, Jian smelled something normal—earth, wet moss, sun on leaves. Not blood. Not venom. Not decay.

He let out a slow breath.

He had made it. He was almost out.

Gathering his strength, Jian resumed walking, each step a little steadier, a little stronger. The forest was behind him now—not defeated, but endured.

And survival was a blade he now carried.

The sun had begun its slow descent, draping the forest in amber light as Jian pressed forward, his steps faltering, his breath ragged. His wound burned like fire under his robe, every motion grinding pain into his ribs, but he didn’t stop. He couldn’t.

Branches clawed at his arms like fingers trying to pull him back, and the trees around him thickened once more—as though the forest itself refused to let him go.

But then, ahead.

Through a thin weave of branches and drifting mist—

Light.

A break in the trees. The edge.

Jian’s eyes widened, heart lurching in his chest. The end of Baihua Forest was just beyond that thinning curtain of green. A vast clearing stretched beyond, shimmering with distant warmth. His lips parted, breath catching in hope.

He took a step forward. Then another.

But the trees seemed to shift.

The edge… drifted farther.

He blinked. It was the same distance. No—it was farther now. His pulse surged with disbelief. He picked up pace, running, ignoring the white-hot agony that lanced through his side.

The clearing receded like a mirage.

“No...” he muttered under his breath, panting, pushing harder. “NO—”

The forest howled behind him—branches whipping in windless air, roots rising to snag his feet, shadows lengthening unnaturally.

He screamed in defiance, pouring all his strength into his legs, sprinting with a desperate, reckless burst. The trees tore at his robes. Blood oozed anew from his reopened wound. His vision blurred—but the light was right there, just ahead—

Then—

He burst through.

With a cry torn from his lungs, Jian leapt past the last treeline, his boots crunching onto wildgrass, his momentum carrying him forward as he stumbled and—

Collapsed.

His body hit the soft earth just beyond the forest, dust rising around him in a gentle cloud.

For a moment, all he could do was lie there, chest heaving, sweat and blood mingling in the hollow of his throat. He turned his face to the sky—a real sky, open and endless and unshackled by cursed branches. Blue stretched wide above him, and the air was clear, fresh with the scent of windblown herbs and distant pine.

He laughed.

A hoarse, broken sound. But it was laughter all the same.

“I made it,” he whispered, voice raw.

He pushed himself up slowly, knees trembling, muscles aching. His vision swam, but the land before him was real—the edge of Baihua Forest behind him, the path to Ten Thousand Leaf Grotto ahead.

He staggered forward, one hand gripping the hilt of his dao sword, the other pressed to his side.

Each step was agony.

Each step was a promise kept.

And as he limped down the winding path toward the Grotto, Jian’s thoughts were clear: he had survived the forest, found the second form, taken the Phoenix Ash.

Now, with Heavenfall Iron, Soulbound Silksteel, and purpose stronger than ever, it was time—

To forge the sword.

❧

Beneath the golden light of late afternoon, the Echoes of Ten Thousand Leaf Grotto welcomed Jian once again. Mist curled softly over the moss-laden stones, and the waterfall in the distance murmured like an old friend whispering forgotten secrets. Jian stood at the edge of the clearing, his breath steadying as he gazed across the serene grotto—soothing and still, a stark contrast to the merciless dread of Baihua Forest behind him.

He stepped into the clearing and unsheathed his sword.

The weight of everything he carried—wounds, exhaustion, triumph—settled into his limbs. But his mind sharpened as he lowered into stance, channeling qi through his meridians.

Iron-Crane Descending.

He began to move.

Each motion flowed with grace and latent strength, his body spiraling through the air like a falling feather wrapped in steel. The downward arcs cut deep into the earth, the sword qi bursting outward in shockwaves that cracked stone and split moss-covered ground.

The fifth motion landed, unleashing a surge of power.

A sharp rumble answered.

Jian froze.

Just ahead—where his last strike had landed—the earth trembled and sank slightly, as though the grotto itself was exhaling after a long, buried breath.

Then the moss peeled away, sloughing off ancient stone like old skin.

From beneath the churned soil and shattered vine roots, something slowly rose.

A monument, carved from age-worn obsidian, rose from the ground. It was tall—man-height—and veined with faint luminescence. Dust and centuries of growth sloughed off its face to reveal weathered inscriptions, carved in an archaic script whose curves felt both alien and elegant.

Jian stepped closer, eyes narrowing as he took in the markings.

The inscription, faintly glowing in the dimming light, bore just two ancient characters:

(Yōu Míng — “Hidden Echo”)

He whispered the words under his breath, tasting the weight of them. Hidden Echo…? A name? A place? A warning?

His gaze drifted lower.

There—behind the monument, partially obscured by overgrown brush and low-hanging vines—was a narrow cave mouth, its jagged edges blending seamlessly with the craggy grotto wall. Had he not been looking directly at it, he would have missed it entirely.

He walked slowly toward it.

His boots disturbed fallen leaves and patches of silver moss, and each step felt more surreal than the last. He stood at the edge of the cave now, where the shadows turned thick and cool, like a veil drawn over a forgotten truth.

Jian paused.

His hand curled around the hilt of his sword.

Should I go in?

The question gripped him.

He thought of the Heavenfall Iron, the Soulbound Silksteel, the Phoenix Ash—his journey, his mission, all drawing toward the climax of forging Whispering Steel sword.

Did he really have time to chase after shadows in caves?

He narrowed his eyes, looking once more at the monument, then at the quiet darkness ahead.

But what if… there was treasure within?

A sword technique? An artifact? Even a single insight could push him further along the path. After all—wasn’t the Whispering Steel Path born from fragments left behind in places just like this?

Jian took a breath.

Then, quietly, deliberately, he stepped into the mouth of the Hidden Echo Cave.

❧

As Jian stepped deeper into the Hidden Echo Cave, the air grew thick and metallic, laced with the scent of stone, age, and forgotten whispers.

The walls—smooth in some places, jagged in others—were covered in curved inscriptions, looping and spiraling like the patterns on dragon scales. They were not chiseled but etched, as if drawn by a delicate hand that had once flowed with divine qi. Some of the characters glowed faintly, reflecting light from unknown sources, bathing the tunnel in a soft, silvery hue that danced as he moved.

The tunnel was just barely his height, and several times Jian had to stoop low or turn sideways to squeeze through narrowing passages. Ancient wood supports and rusted brackets hinted at a forgotten mine or sanctuary, though no tools remained. Just the deep hum of silence, the faint crackle of time.

He passed the remains of fine veins of silver, pale green mineral streaks, and tiny quartz-like crystals. Occasionally, his footsteps startled small rodents that scurried off with squeaks, disappearing into cracks and shadows, their eyes glinting.

How deep does this go? Jian wondered, as the passage subtly widened and sloped downward. The light-inscriptions still shimmered, albeit more faintly now, and the ceiling drew higher until he could walk upright once again.

He stopped at a fork in the path—two dark tunnels yawning ahead. One curled like a serpent to the left, the other dipped steeply right into shadow.

He paused.

Cairns. He gathered some loose stones and stacked a small pile near the entrance of the left tunnel, a marker in case he needed to retrace his steps. His fingers hovered over his sword. Every part of him was screaming caution now, but curiosity, sharpened by instinct and discipline, drew him forward.

He took the left.

The tunnel was narrower, more recent in cut, and as he walked, he noticed fresh claw marks etched into the walls.

Then—

Scratch.

A sudden sound echoed behind him.

Scratch... fiddddle...

His spine stiffened. Jian froze mid-step, breath held in his throat.

He turned his head slowly.

The sound stopped.

Then—

SCCCRRRREEEHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHK!!

A deafening screech tore through the silence, a sound so jarring it seemed to scrape at the marrow of his bones.

Jian bolted forward, his body acting before thought could catch up.

The torchlight danced wildly along the walls as he ran, twisting and leaping over rocks, breath ragged, mind pounding. He didn’t dare look back—but instinct won.

He glanced—

—and saw it.

The Azure Wind Qilin.

A blur of ethereal blue and ivory, its form barely solid, as if stitched from mist and lightning. Horns curved like twin scimitars, glowing faintly, and its hooves made no sound against the stone. Azure wisps of light coiled off its mane like smoke, its deep indigo eyes filled with something ancient and wild.

It wasn’t charging—it was gliding, effortlessly chasing, the embodiment of speed and spectral grace.

I’m going to die, Jian thought.

He felt the pressure, the wind bending around him.

Then—

WHOOOOOSH.

The creature surged past him, a living wind slicing the air.

It didn’t strike.

It didn’t even look back.

It vanished into the deeper reaches of the tunnel ahead, like a whisper lost in a scream.

Jian stumbled to a halt, heart hammering, sweat beading across his brow. He leaned against the wall, trembling, mouth dry, and eyes wide with awe and disbelief.

He had seen many beasts. But that… was not a beast.

That was a myth.

He collapsed to his knees, catching his breath.

Somewhere deep in the cave, the wind settled, as if the Qilin had never been.

He remained there for several moments in silence before whispering, “What in the world… is this place?”

❧

As Jian walked deeper into the tunnel, the darkness gave way to a faint shift in the air. The walls widened—no longer a tight corridor but an arched opening ahead that seemed to breathe with the remnants of something sacred. He stepped cautiously into a hidden chamber, carved out of the mountain’s womb. The air was still, unnaturally still, and tinged with a scent of aged incense and stone dust.

The room was small but deliberate in design, its domed ceiling barely two heads above Jian. The walls were smooth, polished by time or reverence, and bore old carvings nearly consumed by moss and mineral stains. At the center stood a crumbling altar, low and wide, its surface split with deep cracks. The stone was pale jade once—now dull and gray-green.

Around it, arranged in a semicircle, were six statues, no taller than Jian’s waist. Each bore the visage of a different figure—some with halos of flame, others cloaked in drifting robes, all worn down to soft-featured anonymity. Their expressions were lost to erosion, but their postures exuded solemnity and grace. Time had claimed their details, yet something remained—a presence, a quiet sanctity.

Scattered across the ground were bones, human and brittle. Some nestled into the corners of the chamber as if their owners had crawled to rest. Others were sprawled near the altar, one with its arms folded neatly over its chest, hands still clinging to rusted prayer beads. Jian’s breath slowed. He bowed lightly—an instinctive gesture of respect for the forgotten dead.

He stepped forward, eyes scanning the altar. There, half-buried beneath dust and decay, was an ancient, torn book, its leather cover worn to the texture of tree bark. He reached out and gently brushed aside the thick film of dust and web, coughing as it rose in a cloud.

Opening it carefully, he found sketches and characters within—not sword strokes or stances, but footwork diagrams, figures running, gliding, and spiraling through space in light, nimble arcs. The calligraphy was fragmented, some sections faded or torn. But at the top of the first readable page, through layers of weathering and ink smudges, a few characters remained:

"Drifting Cloud…"

The rest was illegible.

“Drifting Cloud Steps…?” Jian whispered, frowning.

It wasn’t a sword form. There were no stances of aggression, no slashes or strikes. These were movement techniques, evasive and flowing. The forms looked too fast, too light, like mist on the wind—a style meant for speed, stealth, or perhaps escape.

Though he couldn’t understand it fully, his instincts whispered that it was valuable.

He tucked the fragile book carefully into his pack, beneath his spare robes, and gave the altar a final look before turning to the tunnel beyond. The air felt heavier now—as if something ancient had watched and accepted his intrusion.

He walked for what felt like hours, the passageways spiraling and twisting, his torch growing dimmer with each turn. But finally—light. A sliver, a line, then a yawning breath of open night.

Jian emerged back into the Echoes of Ten Thousand Leaf Grotto, the stars like frost across the black sky, wind brushing through the rustling leaves with a mournful hush. He was out.

His stomach growled. Days of travel and fighting had left him drained.

He searched the undergrowth quietly and spotted a small rabbit, ears twitching near a fern-draped stump. Lowering himself into a crouch, Jian removed a small throwing knife from his belt. He watched the rabbit’s pattern—pauses and hops, sniffing the air. Then he tossed a pebble to distract it. The rabbit turned, and in that heartbeat of hesitation, Jian loosed the knife.

A soft thud.

He approached quietly, retrieved the catch, and carried it back to a small alcove near the grotto’s stone pool. There, he cleared a patch, gathered dry twigs and fallen branches, and sparked a fire using flint and steel. The flames crackled gently, casting shadows against the rocks.

He skinned the rabbit methodically, seasoned it with salt from his travel pouch, and skewered it over the flames using a sharpened branch. The scent of roasting meat filled the air, mixing with the smell of moss, cold earth, and the smoke curling upward into the starry night.

As the rabbit slowly cooked, Jian sat with one knee raised, his gaze distant.

In his bag: Heavenfall Iron, Soulbound Silksteel, Phoenix Ash, and now—the second form of Whispering Steel, and a mysterious lost movement technique.

Jian turned the skewer slowly over the fire, watching the rabbit’s skin begin to crisp. He reached into his travel bag and pulled out a small cloth pouch, tied neatly with string. Inside were crushed mountain herbs, dried wild garlic, a pinch of salt, and a few flakes of cured pepperleaf. As he rubbed them gently over the meat, a familiar scent rose—smoky, earthy, and warm, evoking a memory long buried beneath blood and ash.

He paused.

The scent wrapped around him like a whisper from the past.

❧

He was a boy again, no more than ten, kneeling on a flat rock near a crackling fire, tucked between the moss-covered stones of the Zexin Village highlands. The sun was setting behind the ridges, dyeing the clouds gold. His father, Jian Bo, sat beside him, rubbing a piece of venison with the very same blend of herbs and laughing at his son’s exaggerated gagging.

“You’ll never get stronger on an empty belly,” his father had said, smirking. “And strong food needs strong spice.”

“I don’t like bitterroot,” Jian had protested, sticking out his tongue.

“Bitterroot is for balance,” his father replied, adding a pinch of the herb with practiced ease. “Too much of any one thing ruins a dish—like life, eh?”

He had ruffled Jian’s hair then, his hands calloused and warm, and let the meat sizzle over the fire. They’d sat together watching the stars rise, speaking little, bound by the quiet peace of a simple life.

❧

Jian exhaled deeply and stirred the coals, eyes distant, the ghost of his father’s voice lingering in the crackle of flame.

His thoughts drifted again, further back, to the time when he was always getting into trouble, curiosity too big for the tiny village that raised him.

He recalled one day in particular—he had been twelve and defiant, standing boldly before the Old Chief Rong, who sat cross-legged on his bamboo mat, puffing on a crooked-stemmed pipe.

“But why can’t I go past the mountains?” Jian had demanded, arms crossed. “What lies beyond Zexin? I heard there are empires, sects, rivers wider than our whole valley—”

Chief Rong had chuckled, wheezing slightly. “A boy your age should be learning to thatch roofs, not dreaming of rivers and blades.”

“I don’t want to be a thatcher. I want to see the world.”

The old man had looked at him long and hard, then smiled—a soft, knowing smile. “One day, when you’re grown… I’ll take you beyond the peaks myself. We’ll see if the stars really shine brighter outside Zexin.”

That promise had never been fulfilled.

Jian sighed. The old man's words echoed like wind through the trees. It had been many years since the incident, the fire, the blood, the scream of steel through the night. His hands clenched faintly.

He was eighteen now. Not quite a man—but far from the boy who had once dreamt of starfields and adventures.

His thoughts turned to Hu Xiao, the brash, loyal youth of the Verdant Jade Sect. A grin tugged at Jian’s lips. “I bet he’s already an inner disciple,” he murmured. “That fool was always the fastest in our matches.”

Jian thought of how far he had come—through sword, fire, and shadow, all for strength. Freedom had once been his dream. Now, it was vengeance that tethered him, a blade drawn tight across his spirit.

He stared into the flames, the firelight dancing in his eyes.

And then, without warning, the image of Zhao Yan bloomed in his mind—the way she had moved with poise, the way her gaze had met his with curious caution, the soft firmness of her voice. He recalled the moment they parted, her silhouette disappearing beyond Snowpine Ridge.

Where are you now? he wondered. Do you remember me, even for a moment?

He let the thoughts linger.

The stars stretched across the heavens like rivers of white silk. The breeze whispered through the trees, brushing his cheeks with the gentleness of memory.

As the night deepened, Jian leaned back against a stone, arms folded across his chest. The fire crackled low, and the roasted meat sat cooling beside him. His breath slowed.

He drifted into sleep.

And the night embraced him once again.

# Chapter nineteen

## Whisper in the wind

The forest no longer loomed with shadows behind Jian. With every step away from Baihua’s haunted roots, the air thinned from choking menace to the crispness of mountain breath. A vastness opened before him—rolling foothills, pine-kissed ridges, and the distant roofs of Snowpine Ridge Town, still a speck across the rising dawn.

His satchel weighed heavier than it ever had—Heavenfall Iron, Soulbound Silksteel, Phoenix Ash—the three rarest gifts a swordsman could ask for. And yet, it was not the weight of metal that pulled on him, but what they represented. His blade, Whispering Steel, would no longer be a vessel of potential. It would be reborn.

As he descended along the hillside path, Jian withdrew the ancient, torn scroll he’d found deep beneath the grotto. Its name still stirred his thoughts: Drifting Cloud Steps. At first glance, the figures drawn upon its brittle pages seemed deceptively simple—forms of running, leaping, twisting mid-air. But the calligraphy that curled around the illustrations whispered of something deeper.

"Shadow-Chasing," the first line read, "where the form of the runner disappears before his footprint touches ground."

He paused, lifted his head, and tried. His body surged forward, leaving behind a slight distortion in the morning light—as though two images of him had blurred in motion. He nearly tripped from the imbalance but caught himself with a grin.

It was real.

“A step that chases shadows,” he murmured, heart racing. “If mastered… I could disappear even before I move.”

The scroll hinted at two further forms:

Swift Crane Crossing — a flowing movement that mimicked the soaring arcs of a crane gliding across treetops and water alike.

Wind-Treading Art — a technique said to allow the practitioner to step as if onto the very air itself, no longer touching the world beneath.

But those were mere names to him for now. Shadow-Chasing was enough. He practiced between trees, over slopes, and across rocky flats. Each attempt was like chasing after a wind he couldn’t grasp. But with every fall, every stumble, he felt closer.

By noon, the mountains parted into a descending trail overlooking a pine-draped road that wound toward Snowpine Ridge Town. Jian slowed his pace when he heard the soft crunch of footsteps behind him—measured, confident, unhurried.

“Your steps are faster now,” came the voice, low and amused.

Jian turned sharply, startled—until he saw the long figure draped in sword-blue robes, hair tousled by mountain breeze and an old ironwood flute hanging at his hip.

Bai Qingsong.

“Senior Brother!” Jian's eyes widened with a rush of relief. “You’re back.”

Qingsong offered a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “You’ve grown,” he said, voice a little hoarse. “Your shoulders sit heavier, like a man dragging storms behind him.”

Jian lowered his gaze. “The storms have names… Lan Kui. Twin Sabers Hall. Shadows in the dark.”

They clasped wrists—firm, solid, real. The world, for a moment, steadied.

Qingsong glanced down at Jian’s satchel. “You found it?”

“All three,” Jian said. “Phoenix Ash, Heavenfall Iron, and Silksteel. Whispering Steel will awaken… for real this time.”

Qingsong gave a low whistle. “That’s the kind of sword the old tales are made of. Where will you forge it?”

“I… don’t know,” Jian admitted. “Not many will risk letting me near a forge now, with the bounty on my head.”

“I know a man,” Qingsong said after a pause. “Or used to. Retired smith—mad as a goose, but forged weapons during the Warring Dukes era. If he’s still alive, he’s in the outskirts of Snowpine Ridge, behind a burnt grove of cedar. He owes Sword Valley a favor.”

Jian gave a quiet nod, then looked at his senior brother. “What of you? Where have you been?”

Qingsong’s expression darkened. “Tracking rumors. Old names in the north have started to whisper again. And there’s talk of movement from the east—banners flying under a golden phoenix crest. But we’ll talk later.”

They fell into step, side by side, the wind slipping between them like the silence of shared burden.

❧

They had barely crossed a narrow wooden bridge draped in frost-threaded pine when the wind shifted—unnaturally so.

Qingsong paused. “Smell that?”

Jian didn’t reply. He was already drawing his dao. The air suddenly seemed thicker, like breathing through damp cloth. From the snow-dappled ridges above, figures dropped in silence, black-clad and masked, blades gleaming red in the noonlight.

“Twin Sabers Hall,” Jian muttered, eyes narrowing.

The first attacker lunged—wild and fast, twin blades flashing in a crosscut. Jian didn’t dodge.

Instead, he vanished.

There was a sudden blur, and the assassin’s blades sliced only air. Behind him, Jian reappeared, feet skimming the earth, like his shadow had arrived before his body.

Shadow-Chasing—his first step in the Drifting Cloud Steps—already felt like second nature.

Before the man could turn, Jian's dao surged down in an arcing spiral from above, body aligned perfectly in motion—a single heavy step planted in the earth, sword descending like a falling meteor, graceful yet crushing.

Iron-Crane Descending.

The blow struck with such force that the man was blasted to the ground, snow and gravel exploding outward, his twin sabers flung from his hands. He lay unmoving.

The others hesitated, taken aback.

“He’s grown stronger!” one of them hissed. “He was supposed to still be wounded!”

Qingsong was already moving, his ironwood flute unsheathed and clashing against another man’s sabers in a flurry of crisp, ringing notes. “Go, Jian! I’ll handle the left flank!”

Two more came at Jian from opposite sides, blades drawing arcs through the air.

Jian stepped once, and again his form split—a flickering afterimage darting left as his real body slid right, confusing their aim. The attackers swung and missed—striking nothing but illusion.

He appeared between them mid-turn and struck upward—Petal Breeze—light and swift, his blade dancing like falling sakura leaves.

One fell, clutching his chest; the other staggered backward in panic. Jian finished with another Iron-Crane Descending, this time from a mid-twist, and the sound of metal rending bone cracked through the clearing.

By the time Jian stood still again, six masked men lay broken in the snow. The last few survivors fled into the trees without a word.

He stood still for a moment, breathing heavily—not from exhaustion, but the sheer energy coursing through him. His arms pulsed not with pain, but with power. His martial vessel felt fuller, the qi cycling faster than ever before. His body, once strained by even the most basic forms, now seemed to move with the form, rather than force it.

Qingsong walked up to him, eyeing the damage. “You… didn’t even break rhythm.”

Jian looked down at his dao. “I didn’t know I could move like that.”

“You couldn’t,” Qingsong said. “Not before Baihua. Whatever happened in that forest changed you.”

Jian nodded slowly. “The Whispering Steel is no longer a dream. I’m almost ready… to face him.”

The wind blew harder now, scattering pine needles over the fallen. But Jian felt none of the cold. His heart burned like a phoenix’s ash.

❧

The gates of Snowpine Ridge Town loomed ahead, their once-peaceful lacquered wood now flanked by grim sentries wearing the dark insignia of Twin Sabers Hall. Their sabers hung at the ready, eyes sharp and expressions colder than the highland wind.

Jian and Qingsong stepped past them without a word, the brims of their wide straw hats shading their faces. Neither had spoken much since the ambush, the air between them thick with urgency and uncertainty.

Inside the town, it was worse.

Posters bearing Jian’s face—a sketch likely drawn by a survivor—fluttered on lamp poles and walls. Beneath them, promises of treasure: silver, golden combs, spirit jade, even mid-grade pills. The streets, once bustling, now pulsed with suspicion. Sword-carrying men and women in Twin Sabers Hall garb patrolled in pairs, harassing shopkeepers and cornering travelers for information.

“They’re tightening the noose,” Qingsong murmured as they weaved through the crowd.

Jian kept his gaze low. “All this… for Tang Fei?”

“Rumors say Sword Valley killed him in cold blood. They’re rallying for war,” Qingsong whispered grimly. “I even heard one elder wants to storm the valley gates before month’s end.”

They ducked into a modest noodle inn, scent of bone broth wafting through the paper screen doors. Inside, conversation was hushed, heads bowed low. A few patrons glanced nervously at the door when they entered, only to look away when they saw the hats.

They took a corner seat, backs to the wall. The server delivered two bowls of steaming noodles and a pot of hot tea.

Jian ate quietly at first, but his eyes never left the window.

Qingsong nodded. “I’ll head back to Sword Valley. The Valley Master must be warned. If Twin Sabers Hall makes the first strike, we won’t survive.”

Jian slurped the last of his broth and set the bowl down gently. “We’ve both seen what they’re capable of. Tell the Master to prepare… and to stall them, if possible. I need time to finish this.”

They stood, sliding a few copper coins onto the table.

Outside, the wind had picked up, swirling flakes of pine-ash through the alleys.

At the corner of the alley, they paused.

Qingsong gripped Jian’s shoulder. “Don’t die, junior brother.”

Jian smiled faintly. “I haven’t forged my blade yet.”

They split ways—Qingsong vanishing into the main thoroughfare toward the Sword Valley road, and Jian turning down a quieter side lane, toward the outskirts.

He walked in silence, the weight of Heavenfall Iron, Soulbound Silksteel, and Phoenix Ash in his pack. His dao tapped gently against his hip. Ahead, past the final row of shops, the smoke of a solitary forge curled into the sky.

❧

The sun was sinking into the western hills when Jian finally reached the northern outskirts of Snowpine Ridge Town, beyond the clustered houses and watchful eyes of Twin Sabers Hall patrols.

Dust clung to his boots, and his breath came hard. He had spent the entire day threading through alleyways, evading sabersmen, and whispering inquiries to fruit vendors, ironmongers, and charcoal sellers. Most had shrugged, some had waved him away in fear, and a rare few had spoken of an old hermit smith who lived far out—alone, forgotten, and possibly mad.

Now, before him, was a fenced-off compound of dark pinewood and stone. Ivy crawled along the walls. The iron-banded gate creaked as Jian pushed it open.

Within stood the skeleton of a once-glorious smithy: a massive, weathered stone forge, flanked by long tables of rusting tools, warped tongs, and cracked grindstones. Piles of raw ore were stacked in the corners, some crumbling with age. The smell of ash still lingered in the air like the aftertaste of an old fire that refused to die.

“Master Gong Tu!” Jian called out.

No response. He waited.

A long minute passed before the side door creaked open and an old man emerged—his beard white, bound in a knot at his chest, his arms bare and still thick with corded muscle. His eyes were sharp as molten steel, and his left shoulder bore the faded insignia of Sword Valley—a sigil few still recognized.

“You call me that name so boldly, boy. Why?”

Jian straightened and stepped forward, then gave a deep, respectful bow. “I am Jian, a disciple of Sword Valley. I seek the honor of borrowing your forge and your tools.”

Gong Tu narrowed his gaze. “Sword Valley, eh? Hmph. Thought they'd all died out or turned to farmers.”

Jian said nothing.

The old man looked around at his yard with something between bitterness and amusement. “You’ve got eyes, don’t you? The forge is dead. Tools are rusted, bellows torn. Even if I let you in, it’s no different than handing you a grave.”

“I can clean it,” Jian replied. “I can repair the bellows and sharpen the tools. All I need is a place to work.”

Gong Tu squinted at him. “So eager to burn your hands. What for?”

Jian hesitated only briefly. “To forge a blade unlike any other. One that was promised to this world.”

A long silence followed. The old man’s stare bore into him, unblinking.

“And what makes you think I care?”

Jian bowed again. “Then allow me to earn your forge. I will work for you—smith your swords, carry your coal, mend your bellows. For a month. Just lend me the forge when I am done.”

Gong Tu arched an eyebrow. “One month? Pah. You think old Gong Tu runs a charity?”

“Two months,” Jian said quickly. “I’ll forge blades for you to sell. Quality ones. Not showpieces. I’ll bring coin to your table again.”

The wind stirred, carrying the scent of iron and pine between them.

The old man scratched his beard. “Two months. You work, you sweat, and you shut up. You forge when I say. You rest when I say. And if you ruin a single tool, you’ll pay with your back.”

Jian lowered his head. “Deal.”

Gong Tu gave a grunt that might’ve been laughter—or a cough. He turned toward the door.

“Get inside, boy. We start before sunrise. You’ve got a dead forge to resurrect.”

❧

From the first light of dawn to the ghost hour of night, Jian labored under Gong Tu’s sharp eyes and sharper tongue.

He swept ash.

Sharpened blunt chisels.

Repaired bellows torn by years of neglect.

He hauled firewood, fetched water, mixed clays for quenching troughs, and stoked the old forge until sweat soaked through every thread of his robes.

But most importantly, he watched.

Master Gong Tu, though retired, occasionally took up the hammer when frustrated, demonstrating movements that bore the imprint of decades. His grip never wavered, and his swings were precise and fluid, as if guided by the very rhythm of steel’s heartbeat.

Jian imitated him obsessively.

When the forge finally burned hot enough again—its flames golden-orange, roaring like a waking beast—Gong Tu finally allowed Jian to shape a few basic iron billets into test swords.

The process followed the old path:

The folding of the metal—heating and hammering it hundreds of times to remove impurities and strengthen the grain.

Then came the shaping—a straight, double-edged blade, simple and clean.

Then, quenching in a specially mixed bath of pine ash, mineral water, and herbal tincture, prepared by Gong Tu’s recipes.

Finally, polishing, sharpening, and etching the surface to reveal the flowing patterns of the folded steel.

But Jian’s true focus wasn’t just the blade—it was the Sword Heart Sutra.

Each night after Gong Tu retired, Jian would take a finished blade into the quiet of the yard, kneel in the moonlight, and place the sword across his lap.

Brething deeply, he recited the sutra in silence.

He focused his inner qi, channeling it from his dantian into his palms and from there into the hilt of the sword.

“Steel that reflects the path of the sword is not metal, but soul.

Intent is breath, spirit is flame.”

He guided his qi along the spine of the blade like water flowing through stone veins. At first, nothing happened. Then—bare flickers. A single note of resonance. A faint hum.

❧

By the end of the first week, one of his practice swords—though rough—shivered when he touched it. When he slashed through a training dummy, it sliced cleaner than any of Gong Tu’s stock.

Gong Tu watched, unimpressed. “A sharp blade is a sharp blade. Customers won’t pay extra for your chanting.”

Jian said nothing. But he knew better.

By the end of the second week, he had forged four jian swords, each infused with a different kind of faint sword intent:

One sang with a sharpness like whispering wind.

Another pulsed with a quiet force, repelling other blades during tests.

A third was eerily cold to the touch, freezing water droplets on its surface.

The last had no visible trait, but when Jian wielded it, it felt like an extension of his own breath.

Gong Tu sold the first two at the town’s weapons market. A Twin Sabers Hall merchant, unaware of the smith’s identity, paid twelve silver liangs for the wind-singing blade alone.

After that, the old master looked at Jian differently. Not with approval—but with recognition.

“You’ve got hands fit for steel,” he muttered one night over tea. “But you’ve also got that madness—like the valley’s founder. You’ll either forge a legend or burn alive trying.”

Jian bowed respectfully. “I am ready to begin.”

Gong Tu squinted at him. “Begin what?”

Jian rose and stepped toward the old tool rack. He reached into his satchel and carefully laid three things on the anvil:

A lump of Heavenfall Iron, its sheen black with glints of blue lightning inside.

A roll of Soulbound Silksteel, shimmering like moonlight on water.

A small sack of golden Phoenix Ash—warm to the touch, almost breathing.

He looked Gong Tu in the eyes. “It’s time. I will forge Whispering Steel.”

❧

The forge chamber pulsed with heat. Shadows danced along the stone walls as Jian stood before the anvil, chest bare, hair tied back, the veins in his arms thick from weeks of labor. The crackling of fire echoed like drumbeats of destiny.

Upon the forge table, he unwrapped the Heavenfall Iron.

Even dormant, the ore glowed faintly—a deep black sheen streaked with veins of violet and cobalt. It felt heavier than it should, dense with something more than weight—a silence that consumed sound, as if it held a shard of the night sky itself.

He placed it down with reverence.

Next, from a wax-sealed pouch in his satchel, he retrieved the Phoenix Ash—radiant gold, warm to the touch, and pulsing with latent heat. It drifted in the air as if reluctant to fall, resisting gravity itself.

Last, he unwound the Soulbound Silksteel, coiled like silver thread kissed by starlight. Light curved around it, as though even illumination bowed to its spiritual presence.

Jian drew a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“Sword Heart Sutra… listen to me now.”

He lit the forge, the bellows pumping, flames growing until they danced like fire-spirits—roaring with heat fierce enough to melt the bones of heaven. Then, he placed the Heavenfall Iron into the heart of the flame.

The anvil rang like a temple bell as he began hammering—measured, controlled, with qi channeled through his limbs into every strike. He added small pinches of Phoenix Ash between each hammer fall, trying to merge its volatile spirit into the iron’s solemn density.

For the hilt, he wound the Soulbound Silksteel around the tang, binding it with threads of qi and reciting the sutra with every breath.

But then—

The fire cracked wrong.

The iron screamed as heat imbalanced.

The ash rejected the fusion, sending a plume of flame skyward in a shriek.

The sword shattered in the quenching vat—steam exploding with a hiss that echoed like failure.

He stepped back, chest heaving.

“…I failed.”

Gong Tu only grunted. “Of course you did.”

The old master offered no help, only a bucket of cold water and a curt nod. Jian didn’t ask for sympathy. He cleaned the forge, buried the ruined blade, and prepared again.

He failed again.

The Heavenfall Iron refused the ash. The ash evaporated too early or resisted integration. At times, the Silksteel burned prematurely or detached during cooling. The balance of the three sacred materials eluded him like a dream half-remembered.

On his third attempt, the sword seemed to hum—a note of intent—but cracked down the middle during tempering, releasing a burst of spiritual backlash that knocked Jian to his knees.

On his fifth, the flames died outright.

By the sixth, Jian stood over the cold remains of a misshapen blade. Sweat soaked his robes. Blisters seared his palms. The Sword Heart Sutra felt like a faraway whisper instead of a guiding light.

That night, he sat alone on the forge floor, legs crossed, eyes closed, fingers trembling.

He unrolled the sutra scroll once more and read it for the hundredth time.

“A blade is not forged by steel and fire alone.

Intent is breath. Spirit is flame.

To awaken the sword is to still the storm within the heart.”

He clenched his fists.

“What storm?” he muttered. “I’ve walked through death. I’ve fought beasts. I’ve survived forests and curses and war.”

He touched the Heavenfall Iron again. The metal felt heavier now—not physically, but as if it demanded more than mastery. It required something deeper.

That was the truth of it.

Jian had learned to make swords, even to breathe intent into steel.

But this—Whispering Steel—wasn’t just a sword.

It was the embodiment of a path.

And Jian… was still not yet ready.

❧

The forge was quiet in the deep hours of night, its embers faint like the heartbeat of a sleeping beast. Jian stood before it once more, staring at the failed blade remains buried beside the wall—six times he had tried and failed.

That morning, after washing in silence, he finally approached Master Gong Tu, still sharpening a half-finished blade on a whetstone.

“I’ve tried everything,” Jian said quietly. “The sword heart sutra… my qi, the timing, the breath of the materials—none of it works.”

Gong Tu didn’t look up.

“Whispering Steel isn’t any ordinary blade. It demands not just steel and fire, but your essence. It must carry two natures—one of mercy, one of destruction. You’re fighting it instead of balancing it.”

He finally set the whetstone down and reached beneath his bench, retrieving a black silk-wrapped bundle. Inside glowed a pale-blue crystal as smooth as river-polished jade—cool, luminous, and alive.

“Moonquartz Marrow,” Gong Tu said. “It tempers contradictions—stabilizes conflicting intents. It will help the sword take form… if you can hold yourself steady while it draws you in.”

Jian looked at him in disbelief. “This… this is a treasure.”

“So was I once,” the old man replied with a dry chuckle. “But if you want it, I’ll need two more months of your hands. A sword like that doesn’t come cheap.”

Jian hesitated—but then bowed low. “I accept.”

Once more, the fire of the forge roared—this time with Moonquartz Marrow nestled beneath the coals, feeding the flame with its stabilizing glow. Jian rolled up his sleeves and, with painstaking care, placed the Heavenfall Iron in the crucible, his hands steady, his breath synchronized with the teachings of the Sword Heart Sutra.

He added Phoenix Ash in intervals, timing each pinch with every hammer strike

The Silksteel spiraled into the hilt-wrap, now absorbing rather than resisting.

And at last—when the Moonquartz Marrow was powdered and infused—the forge screamed with resonance.

The blade began to vibrate.

The entire chamber trembled. The quenching basin rippled though untouched. Sparks floated upward like glowing moths, then burst into silent flame.

“It’s starting,” Gong Tu murmured from the doorway. “Get ready.”

Jian sat beside the sword—still glowing in the forge’s belly—and entered meditation. His qi pulsed like a tide. He focused his mind into the forming blade and began the awakening.

Hours passed.

Then a day.

Then two.

The chamber turned deathly still…

And then—the river outside stirred.

From its tranquil surface, a narrow silver stream rose, winding across the air like a sentient ribbon of water. It slithered through the open forge window and circled the blade, coiling like a protective serpent.

Thunder cracked above.

Rain hissed against the forge roof.

From the hills, the roar of floods echoed.

Inside the chamber, the sword levitated, held aloft by unseen force—the Jian Intent had awakened.

“To flow like water, strike like torrents, and hold the shape of resolve.”

The sword spun—slow at first, then faster.

It turned upright, blade tip skyward, and began to hum with a strange rhythm. Then—

Six ethereal blades split from it, mirroring its form like ghostly reflections.

Leaves stirred outside.

Wind twisted around the forge, pulled inward.

The shadow blades circled the true blade in elegant harmony.

Shuangjian Intent—the Dual Sword Path.

“One sword becomes seven; seven act as one.”

The intent of unity. The mind split across blades.

The rotation slowed… until, all at once, the sword stopped.

Air collapsed.

With a thunderclap of compressed force, an explosive pocket of qi burst from beneath the blade. The shadows vanished. The forge’s roof creaked.

A dome of vacuum spread outward.

Zhanjian Intent—the Sword of War.

“To cut the world with stillness. To break it by standing.”

The chamber fell silent.

The blade hovered perfectly upright, shimmering silver-black with a core of azure light.

Jian rose, body trembling from exhaustion and strain.

He stepped toward the sword. It drifted toward him, pulsing warmth through the air.

As his hand touched the hilt, a shockwave of qi surged through his palm, raced up his arm, and slammed into his Martial Vessel.

The orb at its center—long dormant, locked—peeled open, and a flood of qi erupted through his body.

Too much—too fast—too bright—too hot.

His veins burned. His muscles spasmed. Light pulsed behind his eyes. A roar filled his ears.

And then—he collapsed.

The air shattered with the sound of cracking stone.

As Jian’s body convulsed from the sudden flood of qi, his knees buckled and he began to collapse, limbs flailing weakly.

But just before he hit the ground—

“Hold on, boy!”

Master Gong Tu burst into the forge, boots scraping on the quaking stone floor, and caught Jian mid-fall, pulling him into a seated position.

The old master’s eyes widened as he felt torrents of raw, unbound qi spiraling within Jian’s body, bursting from the opened Martial Vessel like an uncontrolled dam. Jian’s face was pale, his lips tinged with blue, and he was coughing blood as his muscles spasmed.

Outside, the wind howled like a pack of wolves. Dust and sparks whipped through the open windows. The rain no longer fell—it slashed.

Within Jian’s lap, the newly forged blade—Whispering Steel—lay still.

Then it began to shimmer.

The sword, as if recognizing the danger, emitted a soft resonance, and began to draw qi directly from Jian’s body—not to hurt, but to protect.

He understood—it wasn’t the sword draining Jian; it was stabilizing him.

Without wasting another second, Gong Tu placed his palms against Jian’s back and channeled his own qi, refined over decades of cultivation, into Jian’s swirling core. His own face paled instantly. The chaotic rivers of qi within Jian’s body threatened to burst out of his meridians, boiling like magma.

The forge cracked again. The heat from the remnants of the fire turned freezing cold, then blazed hot once more. The Dao-shaped sword on Jian’s lap pulsed, responding to Gong Tu’s intervention.

“Just a little longer, boy… endure it,” Gong Tu muttered, sweat soaking his robes.

The sword glowed faint silver, its patterns shifting like clouds. Its edge drank in the excess qi, filtering it like a divine vessel.

For a moment, it felt like time itself was suspended.

Then—a pulse.

A deep tremor rolled through Jian’s body. His spine straightened slightly. His meridians—once cracking from strain—adjusted, widened. The qi within him no longer felt like fire—it flowed, obeyed.

The storm slowed.

Outside, the wind bent around the forge like an apologetic whisper.

Rain softened.

Lightning ceased.

Gong Tu gasped as he felt it—a shift. Jian’s inner world condensed, like fog forming a blade in moonlight.

“He’s breaking through,” Gong Tu whispered.

Within Jian’s Martial Vessel, the Sword Orb turned, shedding its power completely. And then, as gently as it had started, the storm of energy settled into a deep current.

The aura that emerged from Jian was no longer chaotic—it was razor-sharp and impossibly serene.

Sword Intent Level.

Gong Tu slowly withdrew his hands, now trembling, his face drawn but relieved. He looked down at the boy he’d scoffed at just weeks ago—now resting with the blade of heaven across his lap, his chest rising and falling evenly.

He gently picked Jian up, carrying him across the courtyard through the light drizzle, back toward the forge house.

Inside the room, still lit by the coals of the night’s fire, Gong Tu laid Jian down on a straw bed. Whispering Steel was set beside him—its blade now sheathed in a dim glow, calm and satisfied.

The old master stood by the door for a moment, listening to the quiet before whispering:

“Your path will shake mountains, lad… but don’t forget the hands that steadied you when the storm came.”

He turned away, leaving the room lit by the last embers.

# Chapter twenty

## The song beneath the heavens

The light of dawn pierced through the wooden slats of the forge house, dust motes drifting lazily in its golden rays. The scent of ash, iron, and cooled rain hung in the air.

Jian’s eyes fluttered open.

For a moment, he lay still, feeling the weight of his own body, his breath steady, his limbs sore—but not broken. He turned slightly and saw it, resting beside him like a loyal hound.

Whispering Steel sword.

Its surface shimmered faintly, as if acknowledging his gaze. Jian sat up slowly, stretching his arms and legs. To his surprise, his body felt lighter, stronger—his qi flowed with effortless rhythm through his widened meridians. The memory of the violent breakthrough flashed through his mind, but now all that remained was calm.

He reached out and grasped the hilt.

The sword pulsed in his hand—warmth, power, and resonance. His fingers curled around it with ease, and he rose to his feet. Quietly, he walked outside into the forge courtyard, the morning mist still clinging to the air.

He exhaled, lowered his stance—and raised the sword.

“Iron-Crane Descending.”

He swung.

No rattle. No drag. No resistance.

The sword moved like wind wrapped in thunder, a perfect arc descending from sky to earth. The tip hummed, echoing like the distant cry of a divine crane. Even the air trembled around it, split as though it bore a silent blade of its own.

Jian narrowed his eyes. The sword was no longer resisting—it was flowing with him, alive, as though responding to the very pulse of his thoughts.

Over the next few days, Jian split his time between training and forging swords for Gong Tu, fulfilling his end of their agreement. Every night, he returned to the clearing behind the forge, his sword in hand, and practiced. Under moonlight and beneath clouds, he refined every stroke, pushed the sword through forms new and old, and gradually, Whispering Steel revealed its harmony.

He had once struggled to maintain a single sword intent.

Now, the sword danced with three.

❧

In the second month of training, as he flowed through Iron-Crane Descending into a wide sweeping guard stance, his body spun, and he unleashed a rippling horizontal slash.

The air split, and for a moment—time bent.

The sword’s edge shimmered, trailing not one, but seven mirrored arcs, each moving as if cutting reality itself. The wind howled in unison, and he completed the movement with a fluid step and reverse cleave.

He stood still. The grass around him fell in a wide circle.

“That… was the second form.”

Twin-Blade Tempest.

Shuangjian Intent flared from the blade, followed by the reverberation of Zhanjian, the cutting pressure of pure momentum and presence. Jian’s eyes lit up. The sword resonated with such clarity that every swing felt like a verse in a song only he could hear.

Its qi bursts were unlike anything he had known—not loud, but heavy. Each strike bore the weight of wind-laced steel and storm-charged clouds. It felt like striking with the mountain’s edge rather than a blade.

By the end of the second month, he stood at the peak of the Sword Intent realm—not just in title, but in mastery. His control was no longer instinctual. It was deliberate. Focused.

Yet, it still wasn’t enough.

There were moments when he felt the sword reaching, straining toward something just out of grasp—a deeper rhythm, a more unbound technique.

Then, late one night, as he meditated with the blade resting across his knees, he saw it—a vision flickering within the sword’s intent. A memory not his own, perhaps carved from the legacy of the sword or the Sword Heart Sutra itself.

A warrior leapt through a storm, blades howling, not bound by stance or tradition, but riding momentum like a divine tempest.

Slashes formed arcs. Steps turned into leaps, and leaps into storms.

“Howl of the Free Sky…” Jian whispered, eyes wide.

The third form.

A rapid, aggressive technique that blends circular slashes and arcing momentum. The sword sings as it moves, echoing a Dao swordsman’s fearless charge while retaining the unpredictability of a dual blade warrior. The user seems to dash, leap, pivot, and cleave all in one storm.

This was no longer just about martial strength—it was a philosophy in motion, the embodiment of freedom through swordplay.

And Jian knew—if he wished to truly awaken Whispering Steel’s Dao Intent, this form was the key.

❧

The morning air carried a low chill, laced with the scent of pine smoke and river mist. Jian stood at the edge of Master Gong Tu’s compound, Whispering Steel strapped to his back, its hilt wrapped in phoenix-patterned silksteel, humming softly beneath his robe.

He turned to the forge one last time. Inside, Gong Tu was tending to the fire, pretending not to look his way. But Jian bowed low from the waist, holding his gesture for a quiet moment of gratitude.

“You’ve done more than I could ever repay,” Jian said, “but I’ll return. With this sword tempered not just by fire, but by purpose.”

The old forge-master grunted, not looking up.

“Then go find that purpose, boy. But don’t let it burn you out.”

Jian smiled faintly and turned, his gaze fixed on the road leading east, toward the broader reaches of Xiangjian valley.

He traveled light, moving swiftly through the narrow trails and lesser towns that skirted the snow-covered foothills. Though he had learned much in two months, he knew the third form of Whispering Steel would not be written in any scroll or manual. It was something hidden, either by time or by design—an inheritance meant only for those who could survive the journey to uncover it.

Each night, as he made camp beneath old trees or along frozen riverbanks, he practiced—perfecting Twin-Blade Tempest, letting its circular arcs and fluid spins become second nature. But each time he attempted to leap into something beyond, something like the vision he saw—the storm-dancer of blades—his movement faltered. It wasn’t hesitation. It was lack of knowledge.

“I need to know what the original creator knew,” he murmured one night, seated by a dying fire.

“Where did the Whispering Steel technique come from? Where did it end?”

The road to Tianlu Town was quiet, winds weaving softly between the pines. Jian’s breath misted before him as he stepped onto the old stone path that cut across the hills like a scar, his freshly forged sword strapped across his back, wrapped in a midnight-blue cloth.

He paused for a moment—something stirred in the air. Not the wind. Something colder. Sharper.

Then—

A blur of silver shot from the treeline. Jian ducked low. Two blades flashed past his head, carving through the space where his neck had been.

He drew Whispering Steel in a single smooth motion, the sword shrieking softly like a bird disturbed.

A figure dropped in front of him, cloaked in black and red robes.

“I’ve waited long enough,” said the man, voice smooth, arrogant. “You killed Tang Fei. You embarrassed my Hall. Now face the consequences.”

Jian narrowed his eyes. “Yan Tianshou.”

The Twin Sabers Hall prodigy. His twin blades gleamed like polished glass, forged for death. But it was the aura around him that chilled Jian. It surged with terrifying pressure—Sword Master Realm.

Jian stepped back instinctively. He was strong—but he wasn’t there yet.

“I won’t run,” Jian said, raising his sword. “Let’s see if your sabers can silence the wind.”

Yan didn’t speak again. He simply vanished.

Jian deflected the first strike instinctively—Petal Breeze—his body spinning with flowing grace. A metallic clang echoed through the forest, scattering birds into the air.

Yan came again—this time with a twisting slash from both blades, feinting left and slashing from the right. Jian parried, but his shoulder was nicked.

Twin Sparrow Weave—a style built on confusion, mirrored movements, and disorienting feints. Jian’s eyes strained to track both blades at once.

He shifted into Iron-Crane Descending, the Whispering Steel cutting downward like a divine guillotine—but Yan sidestepped, his dual blades curving like fangs around the strike.

Jian's robe ripped. Blood flicked across the ground.

“Your sword’s strong,” Yan said coolly, “but your body is still that of a sword intent.”

Jian didn’t respond. He inhaled, gritted his teeth, and surged forward with Shadow-Chasing.

His form blurred, each step becoming a flicker, an illusion. Yan’s eyes widened slightly—but he adjusted, rotating midair, his sabers lashing out in opposite spirals.

Jian deflected both, barely. Sparks exploded where metal kissed metal. Wind howled as Whispering Steel burst with Qi, releasing the Shuangjian Intent.

Seven spectral swords flickered in the air, spinning around Jian like a deadly orbit. Yan struck again—

Jian rotated, pivoted, leapt—

Howl of the Free Sky.

His sword blurred into a full-circle slash, one that wasn’t perfected, but felt alive, wild, chaotic. He struck through Yan’s feint, cutting across his ribs. Blood arced.

But Yan didn’t retreat. He drove both blades forward in a corkscrewing stab—

Zhanjian Intent erupted.

A pulse of air exploded outward, throwing Yan backward ten paces.

Jian staggered. Blood poured from his left arm. His body couldn’t keep up. His qi surged and burned like wildfire inside him.

Yan coughed, panting. His clothes were torn, bloodied.

Yan’s eyes sharpened. Then—he smiled.

“Another time. You’re stronger than I was told. I’ll let Master Lan Kui deal with you himself.”

And with that, he leapt away—vanishing into the forest like a shadow swallowed by twilight.

Jian tried to follow, but his knees buckled. Whispering Steel slid from his fingers.

His vision swam.

Blood soaked his tunic. His meridians trembled. The backlash of the third form, the strain of keeping up with a Sword Master—it was too much.

The wind whispered.

Jian collapsed onto the forest floor.

Silence.

Only the soft hiss of wind in the trees. The sound of a wounded sword humming low beside its master.

Then—darkness.

❧

Pain. That was the first thing Jian felt.

Not sharp. Not blinding. Just a dull, numbing ache—like ice lodged in his bones.

His eyes fluttered open, but the world around him was a haze of silver moonlight and moving branches. He blinked once. Blood had crusted over the long gash on his side. His robes were stiff, soaked in it. The scent of iron clung to him like a second skin.

He coughed once—dry and weak.

Each breath tasted like ash.

Above him, the canopy of trees swayed gently. Somewhere nearby, he could hear the distant cry of nightbirds and the steady babble of a river.

“Still alive…” he rasped, his voice barely audible. “But not for long…”

He forced himself up. His limbs screamed. His body trembled like a leaf in winter. He leaned on Whispering Steel, the tip of the blade dragging in the dirt, carving a crooked trail behind him.

He took one step forward.

Then another.

Then another.

But he was barely awake. His consciousness drifted like mist on a lake, in and out of clarity. Images flashed before him—the duel, Yan Tianshou’s blades, the look in the man’s eyes when he retreated. The blood. So much blood.

He wasn’t going to make it.

But something—something primal—kept his legs moving. Some stubborn thread of survival.

Eventually, he heard it again. Louder now.

Water.

He stumbled toward the sound like a man possessed. Bushes scratched at his legs. Stones cracked underfoot.

And then, through a break in the trees—the river.

A broad, rushing vein of silver under the moonlight. Its surface shimmered. Mist rose off it in pale tendrils. To Jian’s eyes, it was the most beautiful thing in the world.

“I… just need to clean the wound…” he whispered.

He took one more step—

And his legs gave out.

He fell forward, hit the rocky bank hard, his hand still clutching Whispering Steel. The impact knocked the last breath from his lungs. Then the river claimed him.

Cold.

The water wrapped around him like a serpent—icy, fast, unforgiving.

He didn’t resist.

He couldn’t.

The current seized him, dragging his limp body downstream. Branches scratched at his arms as he drifted beneath overhanging trees. His sword floated beside him, strangely buoyant.

His vision dimmed. The stars above blurred into streaks of light. Somewhere far off, he thought he heard someone calling his name—but it was probably the river. Or the wind. Or the memory of a dream.

Then—darkness again.

❧

The moon hung low and red in the sky, half-veiled by drifting clouds. Deep within the inner court of Twin Sabers Hall, behind a maze of stone lanterns and crooked pine, an ancient tea pavilion stood. Its lacquered doors were closed, its windows shuttered, the air within heavy with the scent of sandalwood and secrets.

Four men sat in a circle around a low table of dark ironwood. No attendants. No guards. Only steam rising from untouched cups of cooling tea, and the oppressive quiet of men who trusted no one—but required each other.

Lan Kui, Iron Lord of Twin Sabers Hall, sat at the head. His robes were ashen black, edges lined with blood-red silk, his hair bound high in a golden clasp shaped like a saber’s edge. He leaned forward, fingers steepled, voice as soft as it was venomous.

“The time has come to shift the heavens. Xiao Ruhai has ruled Xiangjian Valley long enough. We all know the man behind the smile—a sword cloaked in virtue, blinding and absolute. It is time for new blood to guide this valley.”

Across from him sat Elder Chu Mian of Lotus Heart Pavilion, fan open in one hand, shading his face from the light though the room was dim. The scent of jasmine followed him, but beneath it was poison.

“A bold claim, Lord Lan. You speak of toppling the lion while whispering in a den of wolves. Do you think we haven’t considered it before?” His voice was like silk brushed against a blade. “But lions don’t die easily.”

At his left, Elder Shi Yan of Sword Valley tapped his fingers on the table, the rhythm too calculated to be nervous. His gaze held heat—not passion, but resentment long steeped and aged.

“Xiao Ruhai’s time was earned—but that was a different era. The sects beneath him chafe under tradition. He leads like a father clinging to sons who’ve already grown teeth. If this is the season to end him, I will not sit idle.”

From the shadows leaned Elder Shen Wuqing, his green robes faded like dusk clouds, and his hands folded into sleeves. Of the four, he spoke the least but watched the most.

“You speak of unseating the mountain, but you offer no path to its summit. If we commit and fail, our sects die screaming.”

Lan Kui allowed a slow smile.

“I offer not blind war, but a catalyst. The boy Jian—he is connected to Sword Valley. He carries blood on his blade… the blood of my nephew, Tang Fei. That death gives me all the pretext I need.”

Shi Yan frowned. “A disciple’s death is not cause for civil war.”

Lan Kui’s eyes gleamed. “Unless the Valley Master refuses judgment. Unless he shields the murderer. Then it becomes treason. And treason demands retribution.”

Chu Mian snapped his fan shut. “Clever. Frame the clash as justice, not ambition. You draw the sword, but appear as the wronged.”

Lan Kui nodded. “The Xiangjian Guild values harmony. But harmony is a mask, and I intend to tear it away.”

Elder Shen Wuqing’s voice was low, almost a murmur. “And what of the Sword? The one Jian wields. Rumor says it bears whispers…”

Lan Kui’s gaze sharpened. “All the more reason to act now. That sword is awakening. If Xiao Ruhai senses its true nature, he will shield Jian and shroud him in legends.”

Shi Yan’s knuckles whitened. “I’ve served Xiao Ruhai for twenty years. I have bowed to him, trained under him, swallowed my pride. But I will not be buried beneath his shadow.”

A long pause followed—each man considering the weight of rebellion wrapped in strategy.

Then, Chu Mian chuckled.

“So we are all vipers in the same basket, it seems. I will speak to Lady Meilan. She suspects me, but she trusts my advice. If she can be made to believe that this is justice… she may even lend her name to it.”

Shi Yan nodded. “I will rouse my supporters. Sword Valley is not united—Xiao Ruhai is not loved by all. I’ll stir the cauldron, feed doubts into mouths already bitter.”

Shen Wuqing gave a slow, slight nod. “Verdant Jade Sect walks its own path… but I can bring influence from beyond the valley. Whispers from other powers. A little nudge from outside may help this house fall from within.”

Lan Kui raised his teacup at last, the gesture slow and precise.

“Then let this be the first of many quiet nights. When the heavens shake and Xiao Ruhai falls, we four will rise.”

They did not toast. They did not shake hands. They simply met eyes, each seeing the ambition in the others, and calculating when to strike them next.

One by one, the elders vanished into the shadows of the night, their robes fluttering like dying lotus petals in the breeze.

By morning, the pavilion stood silent, as if the meeting had never happened.

But the wheels of treachery had begun to turn.

❧

Night had long fallen over Twin Sabers Hall, casting the great stone steps and scarlet banners in ghostly hues under lantern light. At the front gate, a sentry’s cry echoed:

“A rider! Injured!”

From the mist-covered ridge above the hall, a lone figure on horseback slumped forward, blood caked across his robes, one arm hanging limp. The horse staggered, foam and sweat covering its flanks, barely able to carry its master.

As the gates opened and disciples rushed forward, someone gasped, “It’s Senior Brother Yan!”

The man on the horse dropped from the saddle before they could reach him.

“Fetch Lord Lan Kui!” one disciple barked as another knelt to hold the fallen swordsman.

Yan Tianshou, pride of Twin Sabers Hall, lay unconscious, his body riddled with bruises and blade wounds, breathing ragged. But clutched in his bloodied fist was the hilt of a broken saber.

Within minutes, Lan Kui stormed into the infirmary chamber. His black robes whipped behind him like thunderclouds, and his eyes blazed with fury as he pushed past healers and knelt at his disciple’s side.

“Tianshou,” he growled, voice cracking like stone under strain. “What happened?! Who did this to you?!”

Yan Tianshou stirred, lips dry and cracked, blood staining his teeth. His voice came in rasps:

A long pause. Lan Kui’s fingers dug into the floor.

“Jian?”

Yan gave the barest nod. “He’s grown stronger. Sword Intent level. That sword… it fights with him.”

Lan Kui slowly rose, his expression darkening. The other disciples in the chamber dared not speak.

“He wounded you?” His voice now trembled—not with fear, but rage.

Yan nodded again. “I would have killed him… but that sword… and his steps… like a ghost. I couldn’t predict him.”

Lan Kui turned and roared, his voice booming across the hall like a wrathful gong:

“JIAN!”

He kicked over a brazier with one sweep of his leg, scattering hot coals across the stone floor as physicians scrambled away.

“You dare injure my heir… you dare stand against my Hall?! Then I shall drown the world in steel until your corpse is dragged to my feet!”

With shaking fury, he turned to a kneeling aide. “Summon every outer and inner disciple. Post bounties in every market town from Snowpine Ridge to Baihua Forest. Double the reward. Offer spirit treasures, Qi-refining pills, anything!”

Another disciple bowed, voice trembling. “And if they find him?”

“Bring him to me alive,” Lan Kui hissed, “so I can personally carve the blade from his corpse.”

The room fell silent, the rage of the Iron Lord filling every crevice.

He turned back to Yan Tianshou, now pale and fading, his breath slowing.

“Rest, my son. You will heal. I will have justice.”

But beneath the fury in Lan Kui’s eyes now simmered something colder.

Fear.

The threat was no longer a wandering disciple. Jian had forged Whispering Steel. The heavens had begun to stir.

And Lan Kui realized: the storm he sought to unleash upon Sword Valley… might just consume him too.

# Chapter twenty one

## Distant springs

The scent was the first thing he noticed.

Not blood. Not ash. Not iron.

But camphor, crushed herbs, and blooming lotus leaves steeped in age-old oils.

Jian stirred. Every bone in his body felt wrapped in wool and soaked in fire. He blinked open his eyes, the ceiling above him a soft bamboo lattice woven with medicinal talismans. Moonlight filtered through a paper window, casting latticed patterns across the floor.

He tried to move—but a sharp pain flared through his side.

“Don’t move.”

The voice was calm, warm, and strangely familiar.

Jian tilted his head slowly—and saw her.

Seated beside a low table, sleeves rolled to her elbows, cheeks flushed from tending a fire beneath a simmering cauldron, Yun Rou knelt in quiet concentration, gently stirring the contents with a bamboo ladle. She looked older—her face more refined, her eyes tinged with experience—but the same tranquil aura surrounded her.

“Yun… Rou…?” Jian croaked.

She turned, startled. For a moment, emotion flickered in her eyes—relief, concern, something unspoken—but she composed herself quickly.

“You’re finally awake,” she said, rising to her feet and coming to his bedside. “You were barely alive when I found you by the riverbank.”

He tried to sit up again.

She gently pressed him down. “Lie still. You’ve lost too much blood. Whatever you were involved in nearly killed you.”

Jian’s gaze didn’t waver. “Where… am I?”

“Medicine Valley,” she said softly. “You’re safe now.”

The name struck something in him. He had heard of it—a serene valley deep within the western ranges of Xiangjian, known to few beyond the guild. A place where blades were sheathed, and the only thing sharper than a sword was the precision of a healer’s touch.

He coughed, wincing. “How… did you get here?”

Her smile dimmed. “After you left, things changed. My grandmother fell ill… and didn’t recover. I brought her to the valley’s edge, but it was too late.”

Jian’s chest tightened.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice cracking.

Yun Rou stared down at her hands. “After she passed, I had nowhere else to go. But my grandmother once told me stories of a man who could heal broken souls and dying roots—the Divine Spring Sage.”

Jian blinked.

She nodded, seeing the question in his eyes. “Yes. Bai Suyuan. My master now. He found me weeping by the edge of a dried spring, offered me a place in his garden, and taught me the way of medicine.”

She turned toward the pot and lifted the lid. A rich steam curled out.

“And then… three days ago, I saw you in the river, bleeding, unconscious. I carried you to the banks and summoned my master. He treated your wounds himself. You’re lucky.”

Jian stared at the ceiling, emotions warring inside him—relief, gratitude, guilt.

“You saved me.”

“I owed you,” she said simply, “for the care you once gave my grandmother.”

She ladled some of the hot decoction into a bowl, knelt by the bed, and held it to his lips. “Drink. It will help your meridians adjust to the qi storm you endured.”

He obeyed, sipping slowly. It was bitter. Earthy. But laced with a strange warmth that spread through his core.

“Master Bai said it was the sword that caused the backlash,” Yun Rou added, placing the bowl aside. “He said it’s not an ordinary weapon.”

Jian nodded slowly. “It’s not.”

She looked at him, studying his face. “You’ve changed.”

He looked away, eyes distant. “Too many times.”

A silence passed between them.

Then Yun Rou smiled faintly. “Rest. You’re safe here. No one in Twin Sabers Hall would dare step foot in Medicine Valley. My master may not care for politics—but the entire guild respects him. Even the Iron Lord bows when they meet.”

Jian shut his eyes for a moment, letting the warmth of the medicine and her words lull him into calm.

But in his heart, a fire still burned.

The third form. Lan Kui. Zhao Yan. The storm hasn't passed.

But for now—just for now—he could breathe again.

❧

The next morning, Jian woke to the rustle of silk robes and the scent of dew-laced orchids.

The room had changed. The breeze flowing through the open window now carried the faint scent of spirit grass and moonbark roots. The soft knock of footsteps drew near—measured, deliberate, impossibly light.

The door creaked open.

An old man stepped into the room, clothed in plain pale-blue robes stitched with silver vines. His long hair was tied back loosely, and despite the gentle slope of his posture, his presence was immense—calm as a still lake, deep as an ancient sea.

His eyes shimmered like springwater over jade stone—kind, yet fathomless.

Yun Rou stood behind him and bowed deeply. “Master.”

“So this is the young man who dared to draw the sky’s breath with a single forge stroke.”

Jian struggled upright and bowed from the bed. “Senior… are you Bai Suyuan, the Divine Spring Sage?”

The old man chuckled, his gaze brushing over Jian like a summer breeze. “Divine? Perhaps in title. But I am no sage. Just an old man who plants seeds and sometimes stitches bone.”

He walked over and sat beside the low table where a fresh pot of tea brewed over warm stones. “But I was once called something else… long ago.”

Jian’s brow furrowed. There was an elegance in the man’s presence that didn’t quite match a simple healer.

“I heard you saved my life, Senior. I owe you everything.”

Bai Suyuan waved a hand. “Life flows where it must. I merely cleared the blockage.”

His gaze then turned sharper, if only briefly. “But I did hear the song of your sword. Whispering Steel… is that what you call it?”

Jian froze.

Bai Suyuan smiled knowingly. “The resonance that sword released… I have not heard such a sound in over sixty years. Not since the last time Tianyuan trembled.”

Jian’s breath caught. “You… know of its history?”

The old man chuckled again, pouring tea into a pair of cups. “Young man, I was there when the Seven Peaks Tournament was still held beneath the Heavenspire Pavilion. I’ve walked the paths of Mount Zhuyun before it collapsed. I once dueled with the final inheritor of the Twin Moons Blade Sect… and I once stood before the tomb of the Sword of Ten Lifetimes.”

He lifted the tea to his lips and sipped.

“I have forgotten many things. But the echo of Whispering Steel—that, I remember.”

Jian looked at him in awe. “Then… are you—?”

Yun Rou cleared her throat. “Master is being modest again. He is a Sword Saint… though he no longer takes that path.”

Bai Suyuan sighed, almost wistfully. “The sword… it consumes. Even when guided by justice. Even when tempered by virtue. In the end, the weight of all I severed became heavier than the lives I saved.”

He reached out and gently tapped the center of Jian’s chest.

“But you… you’re still young. Still seeking. Still burning. That’s good. But beware, Jian. A sword that only slays, forgets to protect.”

The old man stood, his eyes once again distant.

Just as Jian was about to rise from his bed and thank Bai Suyuan again, the old sage turned at the door, his expression turning from serene to sly in the blink of an eye.

“Ah, one last thing before you start dreaming of swordplay and heroic charges.”

Jian looked up, cautious.

Bai Suyuan’s smile deepened.

“Do you know how much the medicine that saved your life cost?”

Jian blinked. “I… hadn’t thought about that.”

“Of course you hadn’t,” the old man said, sighing as if burdened by the heavens themselves. “Spirit Crane Antler, Star-Blessed Coral, Nine-Petal Flame Lotus, and a full root of Iceheart Ginseng from my personal stores. I must be getting senile, giving such treasures to unconscious wanderers without charging a single copper.”

Yun Rou, still tending the stew of medicine at the corner hearth, stifled a laugh, her shoulders shaking.

“So… I suppose I’m in your debt, Senior?” Jian asked, wary.

Bai Suyuan nodded sagely. “Indeed. Let’s call it… herbal reparations. Once you can walk properly and stop wobbling like a three-legged goat, you’ll head out and gather herbs for me. Until the debt is paid, I’m afraid you’re a guest of Medicine Valley.”

He folded his hands behind his back with theatrical gravitas.

“A humble gathering task, nothing dangerous. Merely collecting items from Spirit Spider Hollows, Thunder Root Ravines, maybe a few Poisonmist Glades. Should be easy for a sword cultivator, no?”

Jian sighed, massaging his temple. “Senior… are you sure this isn’t punishment disguised as generosity?”

Bai Suyuan’s face twitched. “Punishment? No, no. Think of it as… therapeutic repayment. Rest is not simply lying in bed, young man. It is restoring balance between what you take and what you give.”

Yun Rou finally burst out laughing, holding her ribs. “Jian, I told you not to trust that innocent smile of his.”

Jian gave her a look of mock betrayal. “You’re enjoying this far too much.”

She wiped her tears. “It’s just nice to have someone else scolded for once.”

Bai Suyuan turned, already halfway out the door again. “Come see me tomorrow. I’ll give you a list. And remember—Spirit Mantis aren’t nearly as harmless as they sound.”

With that, the old master disappeared, leaving the faint sound of his sandals on polished wood.

Jian sighed and let himself fall back onto the bed, eyes half-closed, a rueful smile on his face. Yun Rou sat beside him with a steaming bowl of restorative porridge and pushed it into his hands.

“You heard him. Eat up, debt collector.”

Jian took the bowl and looked out the window at the rising mist curling above the hills.

“I was supposed to be chasing sword legends, not herbs.”

Yun Rou smiled as she sat beside him.

“Maybe you’ll find both.”

The days in Medicine Valley passed like drifting clouds—unhurried, fragrant with healing herbs, and gentle as the wind that rolled across the valley’s high ridges. Jian’s body, once broken and ravaged from the clash with Yan Tianshou, had now knit back together with renewed vigor.

Each morning, before the sun warmed the jade-green terraces, Jian would rise and practice his sword forms in the secluded bamboo courtyard behind Master Bai Suyuan’s home. There, with the Whispering Steel sword in hand, he would move through Iron-Crane Descending, Petal Breeze, and Shadow-Chasing, each motion flowing more naturally than the last, as though the sword itself guided his steps.

The sword, alive with Jian, Shuangjian, and Zhanjian intents, responded with perfect resonance—its strikes no longer merely physical, but carved from qi and will. Its qi bursts left shockwaves in the air, bending nearby plants and shuddering the flagstones underfoot.

In the afternoons, Jian wandered the forested slopes and flower-draped cliffs with Yun Rou, who had begun calling him “Big Brother Jian” without hesitation.

“You used to be so quiet back then,” she said one day as they filled their satchels with red-veined fire root and silver lotus petals. “Now you’re always scolding me for picking the wrong leaves.”

Jian gave a small laugh. “That’s because the old Yun Rou wasn’t threatening to poison me with wrong medicine every five minutes.”

She laughed, tossing a dried stalk at him. It was an innocence Jian had not known in years, and it pierced him deeper than any blade.

When they returned each evening, he would sit with Master Bai Suyuan—who seemed to always be tending a boiling cauldron or mixing fragrant powders—and listen as the sage explained herb combinations, meridian alignments, and the art of healing without ever drawing a sword.

“To save a life,” Bai Suyuan would say, “is more difficult than ending one. Cultivation is not just in the sword arm. It lies in the heart.”

But Jian could feel something else in the old man—an invisible blade sheathed beneath the white robes and gentle smile. Something hidden.

And then, one quiet dusk, it happened.

Bai Suyuan called him into the study, where the scent of aged paper and ink filled the air. From a sealed scroll case carved with ancient cloud motifs, the old master retrieved a weathered manual, its cover marked with flowing characters that seemed to hum faintly with residual qi.

Jian stepped closer, brow furrowed.

“This aura—”

Bai Suyuan’s smile deepened. “Yes. You feel it, don’t you?”

He opened the manual, revealing tightly inked strokes and diagrams of wild, storm-like sword patterns.

“Howl of the Free Sky,” Bai said, his tone reverent. “The third form of Whispering Steel.”

Jian’s eyes widened. He touched the page, and the sword at his waist vibrated softly, resonating.

“I thought this form was lost.”

“It was,” Bai Suyuan replied. “Until fate brought it to me. Whispering Steel is not just a blade—it is a path. And some paths circle back to their beginning.”

He turned the page again, revealing two footnotes beneath the form’s description.

Windstep Surge — “Allows the user to flow like storm winds, accelerating mid-combat and redirecting strikes with minimal movement.”

Cleave Reflection — “Turns every parry into a counter. The more perfect the defense, the deadlier the counter-blow.”

Jian was silent for a long while. His hands trembled slightly as he accepted the manual.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

Bai Suyuan’s gaze turned distant, filled with unspoken memories. “Because the sword chose you. And because I once walked the same path… but chose to sheath my blade for good.”

He placed a firm hand on Jian’s shoulder.

“You have not reached your end yet. You are still rising, Jian. Let your sword sing free.”

That night, under the moon’s pale light, Jian stood once more in the bamboo courtyard. He opened the manual and began to trace the opening stance of Howl of the Free Sky.

The Whispering Steel sword shimmered as he moved, its qi singing through the wind, leaves bending with the arcs of his blade.

Dash. Pivot. Slash. Leap. Flow.

Each motion was a storm.

He was no longer practicing a technique.

He was dancing with the sky itself.

❧

Two months had passed since Bai Suyuan had handed Jian the ancient scroll. And in that time, Jian had honed his body, mind, and sword. His movements now echoed with the spirit of the wind, the sword flashing like lightning across still water. The third form, Howl of the Free Sky, had become a storm etched into his bones—a dance of speed, precision, and elemental ferocity.

Among the bamboo groves, Jian practiced under a tree scattered with white blossoms. His blade swept through the air, carving silent arcs that stirred the petals into spirals. At the edge of the courtyard, Yun Rou sat cross-legged on a flat stone, her fingers dancing across the strings of a zither. The melody that emerged was soft, melancholic, and intimately attuned to the rhythm of his blade.

Then a gentle voice floated in from beyond the garden.

“I see the wind answers your call now, Jian.”

Jian stopped mid-slash, the tip of Whispering Steel humming as he slowly turned.

His breath caught.

Zhao Yan stood at the gate in her deep blue robes, a light breeze tousling her tied-back hair. Her calm gaze met his, and for a heartbeat, Jian could not move.

“Zhao Yan?”

She stepped forward with a soft smile. “You look stronger… though thinner. Have you been living on grass and mountain spring water?”

Jian laughed and lowered his sword. “Mostly medicinal broth.”

But his joy faded a touch when he noticed Yun Rou staring from her zither stool, eyes narrowing slightly at the sudden presence of this unfamiliar woman.

“Who is she?” Yun Rou asked, voice clipped.

Jian blinked. “Ah… Yun Rou, this is Zhao Yan. She’s from qin… and she saved my life.”

Zhao Yan nodded politely. “And you must be Yun Rou. I’ve heard your music from the courtyard. It’s lovely.”

“Mn,” Yun Rou replied softly, gathering her zither with measured grace. “Big Brother Jian, I’ll go dry herbs for Master Bai.”

Jian opened his mouth to speak but she was already walking away. As she turned, he saw something behind her eyes that twisted at his heart.

Zhao Yan let out a breath. “Did I say something wrong?”

“No,” Jian said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Yun Rou… she’s changed a lot. And I think…”

He trailed off. The answer was clear, even if he didn’t say it aloud.

Zhao Yan’s lips twitched. “I see.”

They walked together in silence for a while, winding through the high mountain paths that Jian had come to love. He spoke then—more than Zhao Yan expected. He told her about the eerie whispers of Baihua Forest, the trial of forging Whispering Steel, the monstrous force of the sword’s awakening. He described the Jian, Shuangjian, and Zhanjian intents, and how each had manifested through storms, winds, and river’s flow.

Zhao Yan listened, eyes shining with admiration and quiet worry.

“You’ve walked through more in months than most do in years,” she said, voice almost a whisper. “But I see something different in you now.”

Jian raised a brow. “What?”

“You’re smiling.”

That made him laugh, and she did too.

As they passed through a shaded arch of moss-streaked stone, the forest canopy gave way—like a curtain drawn from a hidden stage.

Jian’s breath caught.

A vast valley unfolded before them, smothered in the blush of endless peach blossoms. Towering trees, ancient and noble, stood like sentinels across rolling hills, their branches heavy with petals the color of dawn. The wind stirred gently, sending flurries of blossoms raining down in slow, shimmering spirals, coating the earth in a second, delicate layer of rose and white.

The entire valley shimmered under the afternoon sun, as though lit from within.

Jian stepped forward, boots brushing over soft layers of fallen petals that crunched only slightly underfoot. A faint floral fragrance filled the air—heady and sweet, tinged with memory.

“I never knew such a place existed,” Jian whispered.

Zhao Yan smiled beside him. “Most don’t. Medicine Valley hides many things. This… is the Valley of Petals.”

At the heart of the vale stood a grand old peach tree, thicker than three men across, its bark gnarled with age, its roots like ancient veins gripping the hillside. It stood alone, a sovereign in bloom, draped in curtains of pink and gold, petals drifting down like snow.

They walked in silence to its base and sat beneath it, side by side, their swords resting against the roots. The shade was cool, the wind carried a soft sigh through the branches above, and for a long moment the world felt distant.

Then Zhao Yan spoke.

“While you were gone… the world changed.”

Jian looked toward her, eyes steady. “Tell me.”

She folded her arms over her knees, staring into the sea of blossoms.

“Twin Sabers Hall moved first. They attacked Sword Valley three weeks after your disappearance… under the pretense of justice for Yan Tianshou’s injury.”

Jian’s jaw tensed, but he said nothing.

“But it wasn’t just them. Elder Chu Mian of the Lotus Heart Pavilion sided with them. And so did…”

Her voice hardened slightly. “Shi Yan. From Sword Valley.”

Jian turned sharply. “Shi Yan betrayed his own sect?”

“He opened the gates to the invaders. Slaughter followed. But it didn’t go the way they hoped.”

She looked at him now, her eyes sharp with the memory.

“They underestimated Xiao Ruhai.”

Jian breathed in deeply. “He fought?”

“Like the storm he once was. I wasn’t there, but I’ve heard the stories from survivors. He held the line himself—sword in hand, draped in white, unmoving even as three halls tried to crush him.”

She paused, gaze heavy with awe.

“Lan Kui fled. Shi Yan vanished into the Zhongdu Plains. And Huang Bo… the Iron Lord… is dying.”

Jian looked down at his hands. His knuckles whitened.

“Lan Kui… used his own sect?”

“Worse,” Zhao Yan said bitterly. “He used his own master. He pushed Huang Bo to fight in the front, even against Xiao Ruhai, then left him when the tide turned. Many from Twin Sabers Hall are dead. Some fled. Some speak of revolt.”

She leaned back against the tree, her voice softer now.

“As for Lotus Heart Pavilion—Chu Mian tried to stage a coup during the chaos. It failed. Lady Meilan survived… barely. Chu Mian was thrown out, disgraced. No one knows where he is now.”

The breeze swayed the peach branches above them. A flurry of petals rained down like mournful snow.

“And now,” she continued, “the Valley is fractured. Sect lines are drawn in blood. The Guild of Xiangjian is no longer united. Some see it as a chance to rise. Others are simply trying to survive.”

Jian’s voice was quiet. “And what of Sword Valley?”

“Leaderless. Divided. Many still loyal to Xiao Ruhai, but many were killed in the invasion. The Valley Master disappeared after the final battle. Some say he was wounded and went into seclusion. Others believe he’s watching, waiting.”

Jian looked up toward the horizon, his thoughts thick with silence. The wind caught his hair and the blossoms around him, swirling them around his shoulders like a shawl of memory and war.

“Then I don’t have time to stay here any longer.”

Zhao Yan’s voice was gentle, but firm.

“Not yet, Jian. You still haven’t mastered all of Whispering Steel.”

He didn’t reply immediately. The sword beside him gave off a soft hum as if in agreement, sensing his unrest.

“I’m close,” he said finally. “I’ve learned Windstep Surge. Next is Cleave Reflection… and then the last form.”

Zhao Yan stood and brushed the petals from her robes.

“Then let’s get you ready. The Valley is on the edge of war. But so is its hope.”

Jian stood beside her, their shadows stretching long through the field of petals.

From somewhere behind them, a soft zither melody drifted through the wind.

The days in Medicine Valley flowed like a gentle stream—tranquil on the surface, but with a current of transformation beneath.

Each morning, Jian rose before the sun crested the eastern peaks, the whisper of dew still clinging to the grass. With Whispering Steel in hand, he trained relentlessly on the eastern terraces, sword arcing through peach blossom winds as Zhao Yan observed from nearby rocks, often correcting his stance or offering quiet advice.

Sometimes Yun Rou would come too, hands stained with herb oil, simply watching from the shadows of the trees. She no longer played her zither while he trained. She said little, but the smile she offered Zhao Yan and Jian no longer carried the brightness it once did. In time, she chose to retreat gently, wordlessly granting the pair the space they never quite admitted they needed. But she remained near—present in moments of need, a quiet strength still bound to Jian’s fate.

In the afternoons, Jian would walk the medicinal fields or help gather herbs with Bai Suyuan, who spoke less of swordplay and more of meridian harmonics, the flow of inner energies, and the alchemy of intent. Jian learned to make Qi Refining Pills under the Divine Spring Sage’s watchful eye—batches that sharpened his will, expanded his martial vessel, and refined the body’s link to the sword.

“You must temper the body like you temper steel,” Bai Suyuan once said, dropping lotus dust into a boiling pot. “Even the sharpest edge is useless without a spine to wield it.”

Around it all fluttered Zhu Yao—chaotic, dramatic, and utterly inescapable.

With hair tied in twin puffs, sleeves always too long for her arms, she would burst in during Jian and Zhao Yan’s morning meditations shouting things like:

“Senior Sister! His ears turned red again! That means he’s imagining you holding his hand under the moonlight!”

Zhao Yan would glare in embarrassment, feigning annoyance.

Jian, often shirtless and sweaty from training, would awkwardly pull his robe back over his shoulders and mutter, “Zhu Yao, I told you to knock.”

“Pfft,” she’d snort. “The only thing knocking is your heart.”

Despite her antics, Zhu Yao was fiercely loyal to Zhao Yan. When others mocked her childish ways, she stood between them and Zhao Yan with clenched fists and stubborn tears. She was more perceptive than she let on, often advising Zhao Yan in odd but strangely insightful ways.

“Feelings are like herbs, you know,” Zhu Yao once whispered to Zhao Yan. “If you leave them soaking too long, they get bitter.”

❧

As the second month closed, Jian had finally perfected Cleave Reflection—a stunningly fluid technique that turned parries into devastating counters. Even Zhao Yan had to admit he surpassed the speed and precision he once showed back in the sect tournament.

And then, on a quiet night beneath the moon’s silver breath, Jian stood on the cliffside terrace, the Whispering Steel Dao sword in his lap. Petals drifted in the air. Zhao Yan and Yun Rou were already asleep. Zhu Yao had long since snuck off to sneak sweets from the kitchen.

Jian meditated, letting his breath slow… then still… then fade.

The sword vibrated.

A low, resonant hum like a mountain exhaling. Jian’s body seized, but not in pain—his limbs grew rigid, his veins illuminated in brilliant white.

Whispering Steel trembled in his grip.

Then—like a dream flooding his senses—he was no longer on the terrace.

In this dreamlike trance, he stood in a vast sword field, filled with echoes of his own forms: the Petal Breeze, the Iron-Crane Descending, the wild storm of Howl of the Free Sky. They surrounded him like spirits dancing in the wind.

His body pulsed with qi—not a flow, but a surge, wild and endless.

His skin hardened, muscles trembling as his martial vessel expanded like a furnace devouring air. His bones groaned, not from pain, but from growth.

Then—stillness.

A breath.

And then—detonation.

From deep within his dantian, a blinding burst of Sword Qi erupted like a solar flare. The sword in his hands lifted on its own, suspended in air as wind and qi spiraled around him like a dragon taking flight.

He rose into the air—body glowing like silver fire.

And in a single thunderous boom that sent a shockwave across the valley, Jian broke through.

Sword Intent no longer sufficed.

He had become a Sword Master.

The air calmed. The sword dropped softly back into his hands, and Jian landed on one knee, breathing slowly.

His body was transformed. Stronger. More stable. His aura had changed—where once his presence flickered like a candle in wind, now it stood like a pillar carved into the earth.

He looked up at the moon, Whispering Steel glowing faintly beside him.

The valley awoke with a quiet reverence.

Bird song hesitated. Winds slowed. Even the peach blossoms that usually danced with careless grace seemed to drift more gently through the morning air.

In the east terrace, where the cliffs met the clouds, Jian stood facing the sunrise, the Whispering Steel dao resting beside him, its blade still warm with lingering qi. A soft pulse radiated from his body—gentle, but impossible to ignore. He had ascended.

From across the garden paths, villagers and disciples murmured, sensing something had shifted. Some bowed instinctively as he passed. Others simply watched, unsure of why the air felt so clear, or why the trees stood so tall this morning.

Jian made his way to the pavilion beneath the old apricot tree, where Bai Suyuan sat waiting. Steam curled from a white porcelain teacup on the stone table.

“So,” Bai Suyuan said, not looking up. “You shattered the ceiling.”

Jian bowed deeply. “I have… finally entered the Sword Master realm.”

“I heard it,” the old man chuckled. “The entire valley heard it. You’ve cultivated a storm inside you, boy.”

He gestured for Jian to sit, eyes half-lidded as always, but glowing with a deeper knowing. “You’ve delayed long enough. Your feet are already halfway down the mountain.”

Jian nodded solemnly. “I must return to Sword Valley. The time has come to confront Lan Kui… and end this.”

Bai Suyuan took a slow sip of tea. “I thought as much. Your fate is no longer tied to stillness. But before you go…”

He rose and turned, walking into the pavilion. Moments later he returned with a slender, dark-lacquered case.

“This,” he said, placing it in Jian’s hands, “is my final gift. It contains pills, salves, and one last Qi Elixir. I brewed it while you weren’t looking. It will stabilize your cultivation during battle.”

Jian bowed again, his voice thick. “Thank you, Master Bai.”

“You’ve already thanked me enough. You brought life to Yun Rou’s days… and chaos to my medicine storeroom.”

They both laughed quietly.

Then Bai Suyuan’s expression grew serious. “You’re taking Zhao Yan with you?”

Jian hesitated. “I… offered to escort her to Yunxiu Town. From there, I will part ways and head to Sword Valley alone.”

The sage nodded knowingly.

They stood at the edge of the valley gate where the peach blossom trail gave way to the mountain paths. Zhao Yan waited beside Jian, dressed in traveling robes of silver and deep green, her sword strapped to her back.

Yun Rou stood a few paces away, zither case slung over her shoulder, eyes lowered but her posture straight.

Jian turned to Yun Rou, offering a respectful bow. “Thank you—for everything. For your kindness, your medicine, and your strength. I will return.”

She looked up at him with that same quiet smile, but this time, her eyes shimmered.

“Be safe, Big Brother,” she whispered.

As they turned and began walking toward the outer paths, Bai Suyuan’s voice called gently behind her.

“Yun Rou.”

She turned.

“Let him go.”

She blinked. “Master…”

“He’s like a wind-carried flame. Beautiful to witness. But never still. He won’t stay in this valley. He may not even stay in this world. He’s walking the kind of path that doesn’t return to its starting point.”

Yun Rou swallowed hard. “But I…”

“I know,” Bai Suyuan said softly, placing a hand on her shoulder. “But a heart that clings to what cannot stay will wither. Let it hurt… then let it go.”

She nodded. Tears fell silently, but she didn’t wipe them away.

# Chapter twenty two

## Before the storm

The path to Yunxiu wound gently through flowering meadows and shimmering bamboo groves, each step an echo of the peace they were slowly leaving behind. But for Jian and Zhao Yan, the journey felt anything but calm—because Zhu Yao had declared herself a one-woman matchmaker.

“Young mistress,” Zhu Yao chirped one morning, as she adjusted the straps on her travel pack, “shouldn't you and Big Brother Jian walk side by side? I read somewhere that shared steps lead to shared fates!”

Zhao Yan raised an eyebrow. “Did Zhu Yao also read that in one of her picture books?”

“It was a scroll!” Zhu Yao insisted, puffing her cheeks. “An ancient one, with butterflies and moonlight!”

Jian scratched his head, clearly uneasy. “Let’s just keep walking.”

That day, Zhu Yao "accidentally" pushed Jian into Zhao Yan—twice. Once while “chasing a butterfly” and again when “tripping on a pebble.” Each time, the resulting tangle of limbs and muffled apologies turned both swordsman and swordmaiden as red as the setting sun.

At lunch, she placed their rice bowls next to each other, dramatically sighing when Jian tried to sit apart.

“Oh no! The wind blew your cushion right beside Senior Sister Zhao’s. Fate is truly mysterious!”

Zhao Yan gave Jian a side glance. “Do all your journeys feel this... planned?”

“Not usually,” he said, trying not to smile.

By the third day, Zhu Yao orchestrated a nighttime “accidental” double blanket sharing. She claimed wolves might appear, and they'd be safer sleeping close. Jian, flustered, ended up lying rigidly with his back to Zhao Yan.

“You’re not very good at relaxing, are you?” Zhao Yan asked softly in the dark.

“I don’t... share blankets often.”

“Maybe you should. You're warm.”

That was enough to make Jian’s thoughts spiral into chaos well into the night. Zhu Yao, pretending to sleep beside them, giggled under her blanket.

Despite Zhu Yao’s meddling, moments of genuine connection slipped through. One evening, they paused by a lake. The moonlight danced on the surface, and Zhao Yan sat beside Jian, knees almost touching.

“You’ve changed,” she said.

“I had to,” Jian replied, voice low. “There was too much to lose.”

Zhao Yan looked at him, eyes unreadable. “And yet… you’re still you.”

He didn’t answer—but his hand curled slightly in the grass between them, as if wanting to bridge the space but not daring to.

Behind a bush, Zhu Yao whispered to herself:

“So close! Just hold hands, you two dimwits!”

On the last day before Yunxiu came into view, Zhu Yao pulled out a red silk ribbon from her pouch.

“The matchmaker ribbon,” she announced. “It’s an ancient tradition. If two people’s wrists are tied together with this during sunset, it means they’re destined.”

“That’s nonsense,” Jian said.

“Then you won’t mind?” she beamed, already tying his wrist.

Zhao Yan raised a brow but allowed it. For one awkward, hilarious hour, the two were tied wrist to wrist, stumbling, blushing, and sharing snarky remarks.

At one point, Jian asked:

“This counts as training, right?”

“For patience,” Zhao Yan muttered, but she didn’t pull away.

When the ribbon finally slipped off, neither spoke of it—but Jian kept it in his sleeve afterward, folded quietly.

As Yunxiu Town's gates appeared in the distance, laughter still echoed behind them. Zhu Yao skipped ahead, humming a tune that only she understood, as Jian and Zhao Yan followed side by side—quiet, but close.

In their silence was something growing.

Not quite confessed.

But known.

❧

Yunxiu Town stood nestled in a gentle bowl of autumn-kissed hills, serene and seemingly untouched by the storm brewing across the valley. Its quiet courtyards and willow-lined streets breathed peace. Even the war drums that echoed through Xiangjian Valley felt like distant memories here.

Perhaps it was the presence of Lotus Heart Pavilion, whose famed neutrality had long cast a protective veil over Yunxiu, or perhaps it was something more delicate—like a prayer whispered by the townsfolk that this peace might last.

As the trio passed under the crimson-tiled gates, Zhao Yan’s face was thoughtful.

“This town feels too still,” she said. “Like the calm before a storm that doesn't know where to fall.”

Jian nodded. He too felt the dissonance. Here, children laughed as they chased dragonflies, and shopkeepers set out wares beneath banners that fluttered softly in the breeze.

But reality waited just beyond the town’s edge.

That night, they stayed in a quiet inn near the lotus ponds, and by morning, Zhao Yan turned to Jian with the firm clarity of a leader.

“You should go straight to Sword Valley. The elders need to know you're alive. Plans must be made. Staying with me will only slow your path.”

Jian hesitated, but her gaze didn’t waver.

“I’ll head to Yunxiu Pavilion,” she continued, “ and meet you later… in the sword Valley.”

The words lingered like incense in the still air.

They set out together for Tianlu Town, the fork between their fates, and by midday, their paths reached their end—for now.

A carriage waited for Zhao Yan, its silk canopy rustling like a parting sigh.

They stood beneath a canopy of amber-leaved maples, the sun hanging low in the west. A wind stirred—gentle, wistful—and red leaves fluttered between them, suspended in a slow, swirling dance as if time itself had softened.

Jian looked at her. She at him.

“Be careful in Yunxiu,” he said, voice low, words weighted.

Zhao Yan gave a small, quiet nod. Her lips parted, then pressed shut again. She looked down at her boots. Then back up. Her eyes were not the same calm lakes they once were—there was something deeper now. A knowing.

“You too,” she finally whispered.

Jian stepped forward, just slightly—enough that they could have reached for each other, but neither did. The moment felt too fragile to touch.

A leaf brushed against Zhao Yan’s cheek.

She turned and stepped into the carriage, and the driver cracked the reins. The wheels rolled forward.

Just as the carriage crested the hill, Zhao Yan lifted the curtain. Her gaze found Jian again, unmoving beneath the maples.

For a heartbeat, the world held still.

Then she let the curtain fall and leaned back, smiling faintly.

Across from her, Zhu Yao grinned ear to ear.

“So it’s true,” she whispered. “You like Big Brother Jian.”

Zhao Yan gave her a sharp look and tapped her lap with a playful scold.

“Quiet.”

But the smile on her lips betrayed her.

Behind them, Jian stood in the dying light, arms at his side, wind teasing the hem of his robe. He watched until the carriage disappeared into the horizon, until all that remained was the whisper of wheels and the memory of her eyes.

Something within him had shifted. Like a sword unsheathed.

He turned, gripping Whispering Steel at his back, and began his walk toward Sword Valley—into war, into fate, and into the legend that awaited.

❧

The road to Sword Valley was different now.

Where once Jian had seen winding paths shaded by plum and pine, he now found scorched trees and abandoned outposts. The soft rush of waterfalls had given way to the crackle of watch fires and the low groans of makeshift infirmaries. Ash drifted in the wind. Burnt banners still clung to broken poles. The scent of iron—blood and smoke—hung like a curse over the path.

As he passed through the fractured stone gates, Jian’s chest tightened. This was no longer the serene sanctuary where he’d once trained, forged, and grown.

It was a battlefield still breathing.

Inside the valley walls, disciples limped through the courtyards, many wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, some bearing missing limbs or empty gazes. Others sat silently in meditation, trying to stabilize their shattered qi cores. The vibrant clangor of practice swords had been replaced by the clatter of walking sticks and whispered mantras for the dead.

A few recognized Jian—gasped, wide-eyed—but most were too deep in their pain to react.

It wasn’t until he reached the inner courtyard that someone approached him: a younger disciple with dirt on his cheeks and a makeshift sling over his arm.

“Senior Brother Jian… You're alive?”

“Where is Senior Brother Qingsong?” Jian asked immediately.

The disciple’s expression fell.

“In the infirmary. He… he’s not well.”

The room smelled of crushed herbs and blood. Moonlight filtered through narrow slats, casting pale lines over dozens of injured disciples, some unconscious, some groaning in pain.

At the far end, surrounded by silence, lay Bai Qingsong.

His chest was wrapped tightly in bandages stained a dark maroon. His once-sharp features were gaunt, his skin pale. A faint sword scar crossed his collar, pulsing with residual qi. Jian moved closer—his footsteps slow, deliberate—as if the sound might wake a ghost.

“He was defending the forge hall,” came a familiar voice behind him.

Jian turned.

It was Elder Mo Cang, leaning against a wooden cane, his left arm limp at his side. His eyes were tired, shadowed with pain, but still burning with the same forge-born fire.

“Lan Kui struck him down when he tried to stop the Iron Lotus from being taken.”

Jian’s hands clenched into fists.

“He took the Iron Lotus Sword?”

Mo Cang nodded grimly.

“Third-ranked among our blades. It was forged to suppress aggression, but in Lan Kui’s hands…”

He trailed off, gaze falling toward Qingsong.

“We held them off until the Valley Master intervened. He drove them back, but he’s now in deep meditation—he burned too much of his life force that day. He left me in charge. I… I am not enough.”

Jian stepped beside him, and without thinking, laid a hand on the old smith’s shoulder.

“You are enough. You’ve held it together. That’s more than most.”

Mo Cang gave a tired smile, hiding a wince of pain.

Later that day, Jian wandered the edges of Sword Valley. Blackened training grounds, shattered stone platforms, and cracked statues of former sword masters stared down at him like forgotten sentinels. What had once been a haven of cultivation was now little more than a shrine of survival.

Yet, amid the ruins, swords still stood upright in the ground.

Not abandoned—planted.

Markers of those who had fallen, but had not surrendered.

Jian knelt before one of them, his hand brushing the cold hilt. He bowed once.

“I came back late,” he whispered.

He stood, his silhouette outlined against the distant glow of a sword-shaped peak: the heart of the valley.

❧

The inner sanctum of the Valley Master's Hall was silent.

Jian stood before its doors, heart pounding with uncertainty. The guards posted at the entrance gave him solemn nods and stepped aside. He pushed the doors open—and the scent of incense, dried blood, and ancient pine wafted toward him.

Inside, the light was dim.

At the end of the long chamber, seated upon a meditation dais carved from obsidian wood, was Valley Master Xiao Ruhai—cloaked in pale blue robes, eyes closed, face ghostly pale. His presence still felt heavy, commanding, as if a mountain sat before Jian, but there was an undeniable flicker in his aura—a dimming.

Elder Mo Cang was already present, standing respectfully to the side. He gave Jian a subtle nod as he stepped in.

“Come closer,” came Xiao Ruhai’s voice—raspy, strained, but still carrying that unmistakable authority.

Jian knelt before him.

Xiao Ruhai opened his eyes. They burned like twin swords, ancient and exhausted.

“You’ve returned. And you’ve grown.”

He studied Jian with a weary gaze.

“I see the third form of the Whispering Steel in your stride… and the Sword Master realm in your breath. Good.”

Jian lowered his head.

“I came as soon as I could. I only wish I had returned earlier.”

Xiao Ruhai chuckled—a short, dry sound.

“Earlier or later, the winds blow as they must. But what matters now… is what you will do with the sword you carry.”

He paused. A faint tremor ran through his arm as he adjusted his seated posture.

“Mo Cang,” he said, glancing at the old smith.

“He should know.”

Mo Cang turned to Jian with hesitation, but spoke plainly.

“The Valley Master’s wounds… are deep. The final battle with Lan Kui’s forces and Iron Lord Huang Bo came at a cost. He forced his qi to act beyond its limit. His meridians are… fracturing.”

Jian’s head snapped up.

“Fracturing?”

Xiao Ruhai met his gaze.

“I may not recover, Jian. And if I fall, Sword Valley falls with me—unless someone rises.”

The words hit Jian like a hammer.

He tried to speak but found his throat tight.

“Me? I… I’ve never led anyone. I haven’t even finished avenging my family, I’ve barely begun walking the path—”

“And yet,” Xiao Ruhai cut him off gently, “the valley recognizes you. The sword sings in your hand. The elders—what remains of them—have already begun to look your way. You forged Whispering Steel anew. You brought back the third form. These are not accidents.”

“But I—”

“You are not ready,” Xiao Ruhai said, almost smiling.

“Neither was I when I became master. But readiness is a sword honed in fire, not comfort.”

Jian turned to Mo Cang in disbelief.

The old smith stepped forward, laying a steady hand on Jian’s shoulder.

“I will stand beside you. Sword Valley needs someone to believe in. And they already believe in you, even if you don’t believe in yourself yet.”

Jian knelt fully, fists pressed to the floor.

“Then I swear by the blade that bears our name—by Whispering Steel itself—I will not let this valley fall. I will restore it.”

He looked up, resolve burning in his gaze.

“And I will retrieve the Iron Lotus Sword.”

The incense burned silently.

Xiao Ruhai closed his eyes once more, and for a moment, he looked almost peaceful.

“Then let the sword of our valley carry you, Jian. Until I draw breath, I am still its guardian. But from today… you are its sword.”

❧

The Grand Assembly Terrace of Sword Valley had not seen such gathering since before the invasion.

Now, with banners tattered and disciples still healing from grievous wounds, it was a shadow of its former self. Yet still, a hundred pairs of eyes watched, most dressed in tattered uniforms, bandaged arms, and weatherworn faces—survivors of the war. Among them stood senior disciples, smiths, sword artists, and outer court elders who had returned or remained.

At the forefront stood Elder Mo Cang, firm despite the stiffness in his breath. At his side stood Jian, clad in plain robes, the Whispering Steel sword wrapped in linen at his back, a symbol of both renewal and mystery.

Elder Mo Cang’s voice echoed across the terrace.

“Sword Valley stands on the edge. The Valley Master has chosen retreat into healing and contemplation. Until such time as he returns, or until the heavens call him home, a successor must be named. One who has stood against our enemies. One who retrieved a lost path, and bore the burden of sword and flame. I present to you—Jian xue.”

Murmurs rolled across the terrace.

“He’s just a boy.”

“A Blade Adept last I heard.”

One of the senior disciples, a broad-shouldered man with hammer-calloused hands and the scorched apron of a smith, stepped forward.

“With all respect, Elder Mo,” he said, bowing, “but many of us bled to defend this valley. We’ve trained, sacrificed, for years. He’s strong, yes—but strength alone doesn’t lead a forge.”

Several others nodded. Whispers turned to agreement.

Another smith—Fan Yuezhi, tall, sharp-eyed, and second in rank among the senior crafting disciples—spoke:

“What if this appointment divides us? We need unity. Let us decide by steel.”

He turned to Jian, voice firm.

“If you can earn our respect, not just the Valley Master’s trust, then prove it in the forge. A contest—one blade, three days, all with our own hands. The valley will judge the blades, not the names.”

A hush fell.

Elder Mo Cang opened his mouth—but Jian raised a hand and stepped forward.

“I accept.”

Jian’s voice was steady.

“Not because I seek power. Not for pride. But because if I am to lead, I must stand before your judgment, not above it. Let the fire decide.”

The murmurs shifted. Respect, doubt, tension—they all swirled together like ore before refinement.

Jian bowed deeply to the entire gathering.

“If I win, I do not ask you to kneel. Only to walk with me.”

And with those words, silence fell.

Then a voice rose.

“Three days then,” Fan Yuezhi said. “Let the forge be witness.”

Elder Mo Cang, stone-faced but quietly proud, gave a solemn nod.

“So be it.”

The challenge was accepted.

And so, on the morrow, the fires of Sword Valley’s forges would roar once more—not for weapons of war, but to decide who would carry its soul forward.

❧

The furnaces of Sword Valley had not burned this hot in weeks.

From every forge across the terrace, flames rose like awakened beasts. Sparks danced in the air, clashing with the pounding of hammers and the hiss of quenching steel. Around the contest square, disciples formed a wide circle—some seated, some standing, all waiting to witness whether the young swordsman from Zexin Village could truly bear the Valley’s mantle.

Jian stood alone at Forge Nine, once the private forge of Elder Mo Cang. The forge was worn but precise, its bellows trimmed with fire-resistant talismans and its crucible lined with ancient dragon-scale stone. As the bell rang to signal the beginning, Jian placed his hand on the forge table and quietly muttered:

“Let’s walk the same path again… Whispering Steel.”

He placed his chosen materials on the bench: soul-tempered iron, spirit-silver alloy, and a sliver of Phoenix Ash he had kept from Baihua Forest. Materials that would test not only a smith’s skill but their ability to imbue Qi Intent—to birth a sword with will.

He took a deep breath and invoked the Sword Heart Sutra.

A pale light shimmered from his dantian. The Qi flowed through his veins into his hands, then through the hammer. With each strike, a pulse of intent surged into the blade, aligning it with emotion, memory, and clarity.

His competitors—Fan Yuezhi and three other senior smiths—worked furiously, crafting expert jian of their own. Their blades rang sharp and cold, each stroke methodical. But what Jian forged was different.

He wasn't just forging steel.

He was forging his path.

He closed his eyes briefly. The Sword Heart Sutra ignited within him, and the forge reacted—the flames danced with his breath, guiding the alloy as it shifted in a perfect flow, seamless. The sword slowly took form: light, flowing, impossibly elegant.

It hummed softly, as though whispering back to him.

By the third day, when the swords were to be revealed, Jian stepped forward holding a blade wrapped in white silk, its scabbard engraved with petals and cloud motifs.

Fan Yuezhi presented his sword—precise, balanced, gleaming with qi, a fine jian fit for any elder.

The judges, comprising five elder craftsmen, tested each blade. They nodded in approval at Yuezhi’s. But when Jian’s sword was unsheathed…

A gust of wind stirred.

The sky briefly darkened.

Then sunlight pierced the terrace in a narrow beam, falling directly on the sword’s edge.

It shimmered—an elegant, single-edged jian with subtle cloud-like ripples in the metal. Its blade sang with resonance. When the head judge tested its cut, the blade parted the testing stone without resistance—and the stone did not fall apart until the sword had already been sheathed.

Elder Mo Cang was quiet, then said:

“This is not just a sword… it is a will, made solid.”

There was silence. Then murmurs. Then applause.

One of the skeptical disciples, the same who had doubted him at the assembly, stepped forward and knelt.

“Sword Brother Jian… I was wrong.”

One by one, others followed suit, not to bow in submission, but in respect.

Later, at the training platform above the forges, Jian stood before them—no longer an outsider, but a leader.

“We were struck when we least expected. But we still stand. Sword Valley is more than its Master. It’s more than me. It’s all of us—each disciple, each blade. Together, we’ll reclaim the Iron Lotus Sword. We’ll rebuild our forges. And we will retaliate against Twin Sabers Hall—not with blind rage, but with precision, unity, and strength.”

He unsheathed his new sword and raised it to the sky.

“This is the blade of Sword Valley. And I will wield it with all of you at my side.”

The crowd erupted—not with fury, but with purpose.

From the ashes of war, Sword Valley was reborn.

The sword forges had quieted, but Sword Valley had not.

The clang of metal had given way to the sound of hammering walls, raised tents, and shouts of logistics. Smoke from newly repaired chimneys curled into the air like rising resolve. For the first time in weeks, Sword Valley felt like a fortress again—not a graveyard.

Inside the Grand Strategem Hall, Jian stood beside a worn but well-kept map table. Red pins marked allied sects; black marked neutral ones; grey, the known territories of Twin Sabers Hall.

Elder Mo Cang stood opposite him, hands folded behind his back, his robes slightly faded from weeks of overwork. The fatigue in his eyes was evident, but so was the fire.

“Your sword cut well,” the elder said. “But a single blade does not win wars.”

Jian nodded.

“That’s why I won’t swing it alone.”

He stepped forward and pointed at the grey marks:

Verdant Jade Sect. Crimson Root Sect. Medicine Valley. And Lotus Heart Pavilion.

“We need to gather the valley's strength. Even those who’ve turned their faces away from conflict—they must choose. If Twin Sabers Hall remains unchecked, it will devour them too.”

Elder Mo Cang looked at him for a long moment, gauging the once-silent youth who now spoke like a man ready to bear the valley’s weight.

“You’ve grown into the blade you carry, Jian. Very well. I will send word.”

With a wave of his sleeve, he summoned a scroll box and set out four wax-sealed letters.

One to Lady Meilan of Lotus Heart Pavilion, whose sect had withdrawn from war after Elder Chu Mian’s failed coup.

One to Master Bai Suyuan of Medicine Valley, a neutral but deeply respected force.

One to Crimson Root Sect, a secluded sect in the eastern forests—powerful, calculating, and notoriously hesitant to act.

And finally, one to Elder Fan Zhi: of Verdant Jade Sect, A neutral voice in sect disputes.

“Let them know we do not ask for their swords,” Jian said. “Not yet. Only their eyes and ears. Unity begins with understanding.”

Mo Cang nodded in approval and handed the scrolls to trusted messengers, who set off in all four directions.

In the days that followed, Jian walked the valley with purpose.

He oversaw the rebuilding of outer walls and assisted the wounded. He ate with disciples, trained beside them, and helped forge weapons for those who had lost theirs in the chaos. In the smithy, he personally crafted three new blades for junior disciples—one of whom wept, overwhelmed by the gesture.

Each night, he sat by Bai Qingsong’s bedside, feeding him elixirs and keeping him company through his slow recovery. His senior brother, still weak from his injuries, often chuckled hoarsely:

“You lead well, Jian. I’d follow you again, even if it’s into the maw of Twin Sabers.”

One evening, Elder Mo Cang approached the meditation chamber with news.

“The first replies will arrive within days. All four messages were received.”

He paused.

“What comes next may decide the fate of the valley—not through war, but through alliances. Not with blades, but with words.”

Jian turned toward the open sky, watching the stars settle across the mountain peaks.

“Then I’ll use both—blade and word.”

He looked down toward the glowing forges, now alive again with heat and purpose.

❧

The clouds hung low over Sword Valley, a blanket of brooding silver that veiled the peaks in solemn mist. Yet within the Hall of Ten Thousand Blades, the atmosphere burned with quiet tension. Twelve elders and sect masters had gathered, seated in a wide circle on raised platforms beneath a ceiling carved with ancient sword patterns—an honor bestowed only upon moments of grave importance.

Whispering Steel rested at Jian’s hip like a slumbering beast. Its presence alone was enough to draw respectful glances—and wary ones—from those present.

At the head of the hall sat Lady Meilan of Lotus Heart Pavilion, graceful as moonlight, her demeanor unreadable, flanked by the dignified Elder Yue Xiang, whose eyes never left Jian. On her opposite end, the Verdant Jade Sect delegation sat with the aloof Sect Master Huo Ran, his jade robes flowing like ripples of a calm lake, beside the calculating Elder Fan Zhi, who always seemed half a breath away from smirking.

Near them was Elder Nian Xue of Crimson Root Sect—short, wiry, and sharp-eyed, his reputation as a political viper surpassed only by his sect’s neutrality. Yet today, he had come.

And shockingly, among the final arrivals had been Elder Wu Liang of Twin Sabers Hall, an aged warrior whose presence caused murmurs in the room. A known traditionalist, he had come in secret, weary of Lan Kui’s ambitions.

At Jian’s side stood Elder Mo Cang, whose injuries had left a subtle pallor on his skin but had not dulled his voice or gaze. He nodded once to Jian.

The murmurs died.

Jian stepped forward.

And for a moment… he paused.

These were the powers of Xiangjian Valley. People he’d once only heard about. Leaders he’d never imagined standing before, let alone addressing.

He exhaled.

“Thank you for coming,” he began, voice steady, clear. “I know that not long ago, I was only a disciple among thousands. But Xiangjian Valley burns—and so does the future of everything we’ve protected.”

Whispering Steel resonated softly, a tremor that rolled across the room like a breeze, as if the sword itself recognized the moment.

“Lan Kui has entrenched himself within the ruins of Twin Sabers Hall. His hall lies broken, his disciples scattered—but still, he clings to power, feeding lies, stoking flames of fear. And he will strike again.”

Silence.

“I propose to draw him out. I will be the bait.”

The moment he said it, a ripple of reactions surged through the hall.

Elder Fan Zhi chuckled, his tone razor-sharp:

“You wish to dangle yourself in front of a mad dog and expect him to bite when it suits you?”

Elder Nian Xue snorted.

Lady Meilan merely raised a brow.

Even Huo Ran frowned.

“This plan risks all of us on your survival alone.”

Elder Wu Liang remained silent.

Then Elder Yue Xiang spoke, her voice calm but firm:

“You’re young, Jian. Clever, yes. Talented, certainly. But this is not a duel—it’s a war.”

The room shifted toward dissent. For a moment, Jian stood surrounded by rising disapproval.

But then Elder Mo Cang stepped forward.

“Enough,” he said.

The weight of his voice grounded the room.

“Do not mistake youth for recklessness. This boy,” he gestured to Jian, “has survived Baihua Forest, forged Whispering Steel anew, and rallied a shattered valley. You forget it was his blade—and his courage—that spared Sword Valley from total ruin.”

He turned his gaze toward Elder Fan Zhi, then to Lady Meilan.

“None of us could face Lan Kui directly without losing more than we could afford. Jian offers not just his life—but a strategy. He gives us the one thing we’ve lacked until now: initiative.”

The silence returned, this time laden with reconsideration.

Lady Meilan finally spoke, her voice measured:

“And what of the execution? Where would you stage this… baiting?”

Jian answered immediately:

“Yunxiu Town. It’s still seen as neutral due to Lotus Pavilion’s proximity. Lan Kui will assume I’m exposed there. He’s obsessed with vengeance—and with making a statement. He’ll come for me.”

Elder Yue Xiang furrowed her brow. “And if he sees through the bait?”

Lady Meilan added, “Lan Kui is many things—fool is not one of them. You ask us to march into a trap?”

Mo Cang’s eyes swept the table. “Lan Kui’s hatred for Jian is no mere irritation. He believes Jian carries secrets that endanger his entire scheme. That rage will blind him.”

Elder Wu Liang spoke at last, his gravelly voice weathered and resigned, his face lined by fatigue and guilt.

“Lan Kui has already destroyed more than half our disciples,” he said. “Those who questioned him were used as pawns or silenced. My Hall bleeds from within.”

He looked up with blazing conviction.

“I love my sect. It was built on honor, forged in balance. I won’t let him turn it into a tyrant’s nest.”

Gasps moved through the hall. Wu Liang pressed on.

“I stand with Sword Valley. I will bring those within the Hall who remain loyal. This is no longer just your fight—it’s ours too.”

That silence turned heavy. Lady Meilan finally nodded once, glancing at Elder Yue Xiang who gave no opposition.

“Lotus Heart Pavilion will join the purge—if Jian lives long enough to draw the blade.”

“Verdant Jade Sect will send forces,” said Huo Ran, nodding slowly. “I trust Elder Mo Cang’s word.”

Elder Nian Xue tapped the jade clasp of her robe, finally speaking.

“Crimson Root shall remain neutral.”

All heads turned to her. She raised a hand calmly.

“But I will join this battle alone, as myself. I see now this conflict is no longer one of territory, but of legacy. And I will not watch legacies be trampled from the shadows.”

Elder Wu Liang stood.

“And though I cannot bring my entire hall, I will come. And I will kill Lan Kui with my own hands if fate permits it.”

Jian’s eyes burned with a quiet fire as he bowed deeply.

“Three days from now. We strike as one.”

❧

The night was still. No wind stirred the pine-laced ridges of Sword Valley, and the moon hung full and bright like a silent sentinel over the battered peaks. Its pale light spilled over broken rooftops, scorched courtyards, and the quiet stone path that led to the inner chamber of the infirmary—where the strongest swordsmen of the valley once trained, and where now a life dimmed with each breath.

Inside, the air was thick with incense and the faint scent of herbs. Jian sat beside the bed, motionless.

Qingsong's once-powerful body was reduced to pale sinew and trembling bones, wrapped in white linens. His breath came in shallow whispers, and yet his eyes still held that familiar warmth—calm, steady, protective.

They hadn’t spoken much for hours. Jian had simply stayed, his fingers curled into fists in his lap, his throat tight with everything he hadn’t said.

Finally, Qingsong’s voice broke the silence, hoarse but clear.

“You always had a stubborn swing, remember?”

Jian looked up. A flicker of a smile crept onto Qingsong’s lips.

“That first month… you would train past the hour bell. Elder Mo had to drag you off the field once. And when you finally collapsed, you muttered that you’d ‘catch up to me no matter what.’”

Jian’s lips trembled, a weak chuckle escaping.

“I meant it.”

Qingsong’s gaze softened.

“I know. You surpassed me long ago.”

He coughed—dry, painful—but waved off Jian’s reach. “Let me speak, little brother.”

Jian froze. Those words—little brother—cut deeper than any blade. Qingsong had never called him that outright. Not even when Jian had followed him like a shadow through Sword Valley's winding paths, watching him spar in the rain, listening to him recite poetry by moonlight while they both bandaged scraped knuckles.

“I was never a great swordsman,” Qingsong whispered. “But I wanted to be a shield. For the Valley. For you.”

He turned his eyes toward the moonlight seeping in through the high lattice windows.

“Do you remember the night we stood by the eastern waterfall after your first breakthrough? You asked me what it meant to walk the sword path.”

Jian nodded, his throat burning.

“You told me: A sword does not speak, but it remembers every cut.”

Qingsong smiled faintly.

“It does. And so do we.”

His fingers twitched, reaching weakly. Jian grasped his hand, holding it tightly.

A long silence passed. Then Qingsong turned his gaze back to Jian, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes—unshed, like a warrior’s final strength.

“Jian… do not carry my death with sorrow. I have lived my path. I chose it. And I have no regrets.”

“But I do,” Jian said, his voice breaking. “I should’ve been there sooner. I should’ve—”

Qingsong raised a trembling hand and touched his shoulder.

“No. You’ve become what I always believed you would—a sword that walks, a blade that breathes.”

His eyes fluttered briefly, and when they opened again, he spoke his final wisdom—a voice carved in wind and blood:

“The falling flower longs for love, but the running water flows indifferent.”

He smiled softly.

“Even the finest things cannot remain. But their beauty lingers. You—are that beauty, Jian. Let your sword remember me.”

His breath hitched.

The moonlight wavered as a wind passed through the valley, rustling the old banners that still clung to shattered walls.

Jian gripped his brother’s hand tighter, holding on like it was the only thing keeping Qingsong tethered to life.

“Don’t leave me,” he begged. “Please… I can’t do this without you.”

The older swordsman exhaled gently, and a strange peace spread over his features.

“You already are.”

Then the light in his eyes vanished—quietly, like a flame swallowed by wind.

Qingsong’s hand fell still in Jian’s grasp.

The silence that followed felt deafening. Jian stared at his brother’s face, hoping, waiting for a breath, a twitch—anything.

But there was nothing.

“Qingsong…?”

No answer.

His body trembled as a flood of pain tore through him. Jian collapsed over his brother’s chest, sobbing openly, without restraint, like a child again—loud, broken sobs that echoed through the quiet halls of the infirmary.

He wept until his fists clenched against Qingsong’s unmoving body.

“You were supposed to see it through… with me…”

He remained there, draped over him, for what felt like hours. His breath came in gasps, his throat raw from crying. The pain was raw—sharp enough to carve mountains.

Jian bowed his head, his tears silent as they fell onto his brother’s chest.

He sat with him long after the last breath had left.

Outside, Sword Valley slumbered in grief.

But within Jian’s heart, a vow was carved—silent, indelible, as enduring as steel:

He would make the world remember Qingsong.

He rose when the moon dipped toward the horizon, and with the dawn’s first light, he walked alone beneath the ancient pines.

The funeral rites of Sword Valley had not been performed in full for decades—too many had perished on battlefields or disappeared without bodies to bury. But for Bai Qingsong, Sword Valley’s fallen son, every tradition was honored to its last incense stick.

# Chapter twenty three

## The gathering storm

The sky over Sword Valley wept.

A slow, steady rain draped the mountains in a gray shroud, as if heaven itself mourned the passing of Bai Qingsong. Incense smoke curled from the mourning shrine at the heart of the valley, where white lanterns hung limp in the rain-soaked air.

Jian had not left his quarters in three days.

Hu Xiao was the first to arrive—his silver cloak stained with travel and storm, his broad shoulders hunched not with exhaustion, but with unspoken grief. He entered the hall in silence, only his boots echoing against stone. Elder Mo Cang met him with a nod, and simply gestured toward the inner courtyard.

“I heard…” Hu Xiao said quietly, his voice grave. “Bai Qingsong… is gone.”

Elder Mo Cang only looked down.

“He died a warrior,” Mo Cang finally said. “With his heart unshaken.”

Hu Xiao lowered his head and stepped into the hall where Jian remained cloistered. The door was shut. No one had seen Jian in days—not even during the funeral rites.

Hu Xiao knocked once.

Silence.

He placed his hand against the wood.

“Brother Jian… it’s me. Hu Xiao.”

No reply.

“I came as soon as I heard. I— I know he meant everything to you. He meant something to all of us. But don’t bear this alone.”

Still, no answer. Inside, only the sound of quiet breathing and the occasional thud of a blade being driven into wood. Jian had buried his sword upright in the floor. It stood before him like a gravestone.

Hu Xiao lingered a moment longer, then turned away—his eyes flashing with pain.

That evening, another figure arrived beneath the rainy dusk.

Zhao Yan’s pale-green cloak fluttered behind her as she entered Sword Valley. Her eyes were solemn, but resolute. Beside her, Zhu Yao sniffled softly, clutching a flower offering. Rain slicked their hair, but Zhao Yan did not seem to notice.

Mo Cang greeted her with a heavy heart. “He hasn’t spoken to anyone. Not even Hu Xiao.”

Zhao Yan only nodded and ascended the steps alone.

At the door, she didn’t knock. She simply placed her hand on the wood and whispered:

“Jian… it’s me.”

Silence.

“Let me in.”

Still, nothing.

She closed her eyes. Then slowly, gently—she pressed the door open.

Inside, Jian sat cross-legged on the floor, soaked in shadows. The only light came from a single candle, its flame trembling with the wind. His eyes were hollow, rimmed with red, and his lips parted slightly when he saw her—but he said nothing.

Whispering Steel stood buried in the floor before him, as if demanding his silence.

Zhao Yan walked in without a word. She knelt in front of him, gaze meeting his.

“You don’t have to carry this alone.”

Jian looked away, jaw clenched. “I failed him.”

Zhao Yan frowned, but stayed still.

“I wasn’t there. If I had been… maybe…”

He swallowed, voice cracking.

“Maybe Qingsong would still be alive.”

The words shattered from his mouth like broken glass.

“Everyone who gets close to me—dies.”

He shook his head, and his hands trembled.

“My family. My village. And now him.”

Zhao Yan reached forward, placing her palm on his.

“Listen to me.”

He didn’t.

So she moved closer, her voice barely a whisper.

“If Qingsong were here… would he want you to be like this?”

Jian’s breath hitched.

“He believed in you. We all do. Don’t shame his memory by giving in to fear.”

A tear traced down his cheek. “But what if I lose you next? Or Hu Xiao? Or Yun Rou? I— I don’t think I can keep surviving while the people I love keep falling.”

Zhao Yan didn’t flinch. She leaned forward until their foreheads touched, her hand cupping his cheek.

“You are not alone. I won’t let you be.”

Silence fell. Only the sound of the rain outside.

Zhao Yan's voice became softer still.

“The man I met in in yunxiu… the one who faced beasts, who forged his sword through flame and blood… he wouldn’t let fear stop him.”

Jian’s eyes met hers—truly met hers—and for the first time in days, his breath steadied.

“Zhao Yan…”

“I’m here.”

His walls crumbled.

He buried his face in her shoulder, and the tears came, silent and slow.

She held him.

Not as a sect heir. Not as a warrior.

But as a man who had carried too much for too long.

And she stayed with him until the candle guttered out.

Later that night, when Jian emerged into the rain, Whispering Steel in hand, the valley looked different—not because it had changed, but because he had.

The guilt remained. The grief remained.

But the sword no longer trembled in the floor.

It beat steady with his pulse again.

He looked at the shrine one last time, where Qingsong’s name had been etched in sword script.

“I’ll carry you with me, senior brother. I won’t let your light fade.”

Behind him, Zhao Yan stood silently beneath a rain-soaked awning.

They exchanged no words.

But their bond was no longer a fragile hope.

It had become a promise.

❧

The war table in Sword Valley’s Grand Hall was surrounded by figures who once walked separate paths—now bound together by a single thread of purpose.

A large map of Xiangjian Valley was spread across the table, pinned with carved jade markers: the crests of Sword Valley, Verdant Jade Sect, Crimson Root Sect, and Lotus Heart Pavilion encircled one marker etched with Twin Sabers Hall's sigil—split and blackened.

Torches flickered. Rain tapped lightly on the tiled roof above. The room was silent, expectant.

Jian stood at the head of the table, Whispering Steel sheathed at his side. At his right stood Zhao Yan, her lotus-embroidered robes fluttering gently as she watched him with quiet intensity. To his left was Hu Xiao, arms crossed, battle-hardened eyes unreadable.

Across the table stood:

Elder Mo Cang, his presence more gaunt but still resolute.

Lady Meilan and Elder Yue Xiang of Lotus Heart Pavilion, calm and composed.

Master Huo Ran and Elder Fan Zhi of Verdant Jade Sect, serious, nodding with respect.

Elder Nian Xue of Crimson Root Sect, ever the opportunist, but currently aligned.

Elder Wu Liang, the defector from Twin Sabers Hall, whose regret gave him purpose.

Jian stepped forward.

“Three days ago, we mourned one of our own. Today, we prepare to strike back.”

He placed a stone over Yunxiu Town.

“Lan Kui has fortified himself within the outer halls of Twin Sabers, but if we strike directly, the cost will be unbearable. Instead—”

He tapped his chest.

“We use me.”

The room stirred.

“He wants me dead. He thinks I’m still grieving, still broken. Let him believe that.”

He looked to the map.

“I will ride to Yunxiu alone. I’ll draw him out, and when he steps into the open—that’s when the sword falls.”

Mo Cang’s eyes narrowed. “And if he sees through it?”

Hu Xiao stepped forward. “Then we cut him down anyway.”

Jian turned to the rest.

“Each of you… each of your sects… I won’t lie. This will be dangerous. But if Lan Kui falls, the darkness he cast across this valley dies with him.”

Lady Meilan nodded solemnly. “The Lotus will stand with you.”

Master Huo Ran spoke next. “And so will Verdant Jade.”

Even Nian Xue gave a small bow. “A stable valley is better for roots to grow.”

They all turned to Wu Liang. The disgraced elder met Jian’s gaze with a steady one of his own.

“Let me face him too. Let me restore what he corrupted.”

Jian nodded.

The room fell into motion—orders relayed, scouts dispatched, sword banners unfurled.

The war had begun.

❧

The next morning, beneath a sky of peach-colored clouds, the valley gates stood open. Disciples lined the stone path, their eyes filled with determination and silent awe.

Jian, clad in battle robes of black and silver, stood beside Whispering Steel. His hair was tied in a high knot, his blade gleaming faintly with a pulse of qi.

Hu Xiao approached first.

They clasped forearms.

“Ride fast. Be reckless, but don’t die.”

Jian chuckled softly. “That’s your job.”

Hu Xiao’s eyes held a quiet pride. “Go bring down the storm.”

They held each other’s gaze. Then Hu Xiao stepped back.

Zhao Yan stepped forward next, her face unreadable, her eyes searching.

They stood close—just far enough to seem composed.

“Be careful,” she whispered. “He’s more dangerous than any of us know.”

Jian nodded. “So am I.”

A breeze fluttered her sleeves.

“If something happens—”

“Don’t,” she interrupted softly. “you’ll come back.”

He reached for her hand, paused—then simply took a step closer. Their foreheads brushed together, just for a moment.

The world slowed.

Maple leaves danced down from the nearby trees, twirling between them in soft spirals.

“If this were a quieter world,” he murmured, “I would’ve asked to stay by your side.”

“Then survive this one,” she replied, her voice trembling just slightly, “and I’ll wait for the next.”

Zhao Yan stepped back with grace, eyes misted. Zhu Yao behind her covered her mouth, already sniffling.

“Don’t let her cry too much,” Jian said with a small smile.

“She’ll cry for both of us,” Zhao Yan returned.

He turned toward the gate.

The sun crested over the cliffs, bathing him in gold.

Without another word, Jian mounted his horse, Whispering Steel sheathed at his back, and rode out of Sword Valley beneath the flags of unity.

Behind him, the allies of Sword Valley began to gather—one sect at a time.

Toward Yunxiu.

Toward destiny.

❧

The delicate streets of Yunxiu Town, once known for their vibrant flower markets and ink-scroll vendors, now echoed with tension.

Petals drifted untouched on the cobblestones as disciples of Lotus Heart Pavilion, robed in pale silk stitched with lotus motifs, marched along the narrow alleys in neat formation. Their movements were graceful yet alert—fans folded at their hips, short swords shimmering beneath their sleeves.

They checked rooftops. Peered down alleys. The clang of bronze bells echoed as curfew was signaled.

Shopkeepers pulled down their shutters. An old herbalist swept his front steps faster than usual, glancing nervously at the patrols. Mothers called in their children.

A passing disciple whispered to another, “A battle is coming.”

From balconies above, shadows watched. The people of Yunxiu knew better than to speak too much when the air tasted like steel.

❧

Elsewhere, far to the west, in Tianlu City, the flag of the Verdant Jade Sect rippled over the tiled gates of its ancient green-walled compound.

Master Huo Ran watched silently from the central tower as lines of armored disciples poured down the steps like a river of jade.

“Twenty squads to Yunxiu,” he ordered. “Leave the White Crane Division to defend Tianlu and the sect.”

Below, Elder Fan Zhi nodded as he led the marching column out of the city gates, their boots thudding in harmony with their pounding hearts.

❧

Beneath the mists of Crimson Root Sect, known for their elusive neutrality, Elder Nian Xue rode alone.

Her robe was soaked with rain, his horse tired, but his eyes were alive with purpose.

As the towers of Medicine Valley loomed ahead, wrapped in the aroma of incense and dew, he looked up.

“Bai Suyuan…” she whispered. “It's time to make a choice.”

she passed under the Moon Gate, requesting an urgent audience.

❧

Along the eastern ridge, the blades of Sword Valley glinted like a river of stars under the waning sun.

Zhao Yan rode at the front beside Hu Xiao, her expression unreadable. The crest of the sword burned silver across her chest. Zhu Yao, mounted just behind, hummed a nervous tune—half bravery, half dread.

Behind them, over two hundred disciples marched—some still bearing bandages, others fresh from training. Elder Mo Cang, bruised but defiant, rode near the rear, his gaze sweeping the horizon.

The wind carried the hum of steel.

“To Yunxiu,” Zhao Yan said, tightening her reins. “For Qingsong. For Sword Valley.”

❧

Within the heart of Twin Sabers Hall, once majestic but now cracked and cloaked in unnatural smoke, Lan Kui sat upon the Sect Master’s Throne.

Mist hung thick in the upper beams of the great hall. Ghost-lights flickered. Black flags drooped from the rafters.

In his lap rested the Iron Lotus Sword, its jade-gold blade flickering with qi, pulsing softly like a heartbeat.

His eyes were locked on the doorway—as if watching something long prophesied.

A young disciple stumbled in and fell to one knee.

“Master… the other sects… they’ve begun to move.”

Lan Kui didn’t blink. He rose slowly, the Iron Lotus Sword slipping into his hand with a whisper.

“Let them come,” he murmured. “Let’s see how they break into a fortress built of treachery.”

The disciple trembled as the mists thickened.

“Ready the blood sigils. Seal the outer grounds. No one moves until I command it.”

❧

And then—across the valley’s veins, on a lone road lined with scattered peach petals—Jian rode into Yunxiu Town.

He was alone.

Clad in plain dark robes, hood pulled back, his expression carved from stone. Whispering Steel was strapped across his back, humming faintly like a beast eager for battle.

The guards at the edge of town moved aside silently. The Lotus Pavilion scouts followed him from the shadows but did not interfere.

He passed shuttered windows, empty streets, a single lantern flickering in the wind. His horse’s hooves echoed like drumbeats.

In the distance, clouds began to gather.

Above rooftops, sharp-eyed watchers of Twin Sabers Hall noted his presence.

Jian stopped at a lonely shrine in the center of the town—built for wandering swordsmen.

He dismounted and placed one hand on the altar.

“One more blade for the storm,” he whispered.

Then he stepped into the heart of Yunxiu, ready to become the bait.

The morning mist draped Yunxiu Town in pale veils, soft and cool, curling along the tiled eaves and narrow alleys. The stillness was deceptive.

Jian walked alone.

His every step whispered over cobblestone, stirring fallen petals into the air—fragments of maple and peach drifting behind him like a trail of memory.

Though his head was bowed, his senses swept wide. He felt eyes, sharp and watchful, veiled behind straw hats and merchant cloaks. Twin Sabers Hall agents dotted the crowd like cracks in painted glass. They leaned against walls, loitered by closed stalls, or pretended to polish apples. But Jian saw them.

Their postures were too still. Their breathing too controlled.

Their hands never strayed far from their hidden blades.

Above him, shadowed silhouettes darted across the rooftops—silent as falling snow, cloaks fluttering against the gray dawn. Jian’s presence had pulled them in like moths to a sword’s flame.

At his side, Whispering Steel shimmered softly, the blade’s qi harmonizing with the breeze. Held in his left hand, the sheath gently vibrated with restrained power. Jian’s robes swayed, though there was no wind; each footstep carried such clarity of intent that ripples of qi pulsed beneath his soles, causing dry leaves to scatter and street lanterns to flicker.

Not a soul dared meet his gaze.

He came to a stop beneath an old wooden sign swaying above the street—Butterfly Song Inn. A faded image of a winged maiden played across the creaking signboard.

Without a word, Jian stepped inside.

❧

The scent of wine and old timber filled the inn. Shadows clung to the rafters. A few customers nursed untouched cups. Swordsmen sat alone or in twos—drifting travelers with calloused hands and silent eyes.

The moment Jian crossed the threshold, the entire atmosphere shifted.

Teacups paused midair.

Eyes narrowed.

Fingers tightened subtly around hilts.

Jian’s boots tapped once, twice, across the wooden floor. Every man in the room noted the sword at his side—the way it glimmered like polished moonlight. He didn’t speak.

He took a corner table near a shuttered window and placed Whispering Steel on the table with practiced grace—like laying down fate itself.

The moment the scabbard touched the wood, movement exploded.

From every direction—they came.

One leapt from behind the bar. Another flipped over the railing from the second floor. Two surged from the kitchen. Five more burst through the windows in synchronized formation. Silent killers, masked and robed, blades gleaming like water.

Even those who had shadowed him from the rooftops now dropped through the ceiling beams like wolves descending on prey.

For a heartbeat—Jian did nothing.

The inn slowed.

Time thinned.

His eyes half-lidded, he reached out slowly toward his sword, fingers wrapping the hilt in perfect silence.

A breath passed.

Then came the unsheathing.

A shing—so sharp, it cleaved the stillness of the world itself.

BOOM.

A shockwave of qi burst from Jian’s seat like an explosion of soundless thunder. Tables and chairs were hurled backwards. The very air compressed and cracked outward. Walls trembled. Lanterns shattered.

The first five attackers were flung into beams and walls with bone-snapping force. The ones in mid-air froze—suspended by sheer qi pressure—then spiraled away like leaves in a cyclone.

One landed face-first into the sake barrel. Another crashed through the second-floor balcony. The room groaned, windows rattled, and wooden pillars cracked under the force of the explosion.

When the dust settled—

Jian stood, Whispering Steel half-drawn, its edge humming softly like a sigh.

The last assailant tried to crawl to his feet, but Jian’s gaze froze him in place.

Around him, the inn lay in shambles—tables overturned, air thick with tension and shattered qi. The attackers groaned, unable to rise.

The inn creaked under the weight of silence—but it didn’t last.

Even as Jian sheathed Whispering Steel, bloodied figures groaned from the ground. The flicker of retreat glinted in their eyes, but no order came. Instead, a sharp whistle sliced the air—a signal.

From the shattered windows, doors, and roof—they came again.

Dozens now.

Each cloaked in black, faces covered in cloth, Dao swords drawn with a unified clang. They moved like trained wolves—flanking, surrounding, flowing like water into the chaos of the inn. Discipline in every step. Formation in every strike.

They wanted his head.

Jian did not move.

Until the first sword neared his throat.

Then he vanished.

A flicker. A blur. A ghost.

With a single fluid motion, Whispering Steel gleamed out in a shallow arc. The technique was the simplest—Crimson Petal Descending, the first form he had ever learned.

But wielded by a Sword Master, even simplicity became slaughter.

A diagonal slash.

A shoulder split open.

A reverse sweep—two necks sprayed crimson mist.

A pivot, half-step, and flick—three blades shattered, and their wielders followed.

His sword sang with a whistle as if carried on spring wind—gentle, elegant, unhurried. Yet where it passed, men fell like cut bamboo.

Their formations broke. Panic surged.

Still they came.

From the kitchen entrance. Through the holes in the wall. Across the second floor.

The inn became a crucible, and Jian stood at its center like the eye of a storm—petals blooming from his blade with every stroke.

The room choked with the sound of metal clashing, bodies crashing, and the sharp screech of blades carving through flesh. Blood slicked the floors. Disciples cried out before they hit the ground. The wood beams dripped red.

Outside, chaos bloomed.

Civilians screamed and scattered down the alleyways.

Doors slammed.

Lotus Heart Pavilion disciples clashed with Twin Sabers Hall assassins pouring into the streets, steel flashing against moonlight and flame.

Inside, Jian remained calm—focused.

His robes were torn and blood-streaked, but none of it was his. Each strike flowed into the next like ink onto silk.

He still hadn't used his true techniques.

A crash thundered from the doorway.

Someone stepped in—a head taller than the rest, face uncovered. A white scarf whipped in the wind around his neck. His presence pressed down like a falling mountain.

This one pulsed with real cultivation—late Blade Adept, perhaps even peak.

His Dao sword gleamed black, curved and serrated at the edge, humming with violent intent.

He raised his blade and pointed at Jian without a word. The assassins parted around him.

Jian’s eyes narrowed.

A step. Then another.

The man exploded forward—speed matched with strength, blade cleaving down like an avalanche.

Jian’s body swayed to the side, robes flowing. Sparks flew as metal kissed metal.

And then he moved into—

A whisper. A gust. A flurry of movement.

His feet shifted to the Petal Breeze Footwork—the first form of the Whispering Steel. His body danced like a falling blossom in the wind, each motion elusive, deceptive, deadly.

Blades clashed again. Once. Twice. Ten times.

The assassin roared, infusing his blade with raw qi—but Jian had already vanished behind him.

A single upward slice tore through ribs and lungs. A final horizontal sweep spilled the last of his breath.

The man collapsed, wide-eyed, sword falling beside him.

The rest saw. The rest fled.

But Jian didn't chase.

He stood, Whispering Steel dripping red, the breeze catching in his hair, his eyes distant—not angry, not triumphant. Just... tired.

The inn was wreckage. Blood painted the walls. Bodies lay strewn in piles like discarded puppets. A single lantern still swung from a cracked beam, casting golden arcs on the carnage.

He exhaled slowly and sheathed his blade.

Outside, another scream rang.

The wind snapped cold as Jian stepped from the ruined Butterfly Song Inn, his boots trailing crimson.

But before he could even raise his sword fully—

A roar shattered the air like a thunderclap.

A blur of power, a streak of dark metal, and Yan Tianshou struck—his dual sabers carving through the morning mist with killing intent.

Jian raised Whispering Steel just in time.

CLANG! The impact sent shudders down his arms, driving him backward across broken stone. His boots dragged furrows in the earth. Debris flew.

Yan Tianshou stood in front of him—taller, broader, a beast draped in rage and black steel.

“You again!” Tianshou snarled, eyes bloodshot. “You should have died in Snowpine!”

“You really came here alone,” Yan sneered, his voice sharp with contempt. “The coward who ran from Twin Sabers Hall all those years ago dares to parade himself openly?”

Jian did not respond..

This, more than words, stoked Yan Tianshou’s rage.

“Say something!” he barked, qi crackling around him. “You think you're worthy of the names you wear? Valley Lord? Dao swordsman? You’re just a vengeful brat playing at being a hero!”

Jian finally stood, still calm, his expression carved from stone.

“Are you done barking?”

Without waiting for a reply, he attacked again.

Twin sabers blurred like twin comets—cutting, spinning, splitting the air with their howling arcs.

Jian parried, barely. His instincts flared—Petal Breeze Footwork barely keeping him from being sliced open. He stepped, twisted, and evaded, but Yan Tianshou pressed hard.

Behind them, Twin Sabers Hall troops poured into the streets.

From the rooftops, down the alleys, emerging from hidden trapdoors—they came. Dozens. Then hundreds.

Jian was surrounded once more.

Too many.

But before they could overwhelm him—

A bell chime rang out from the north gate.

Lotus Heart Pavilion disciples arrived in graceful formation—silver-white robes fluttering like swan feathers. Their swords struck with elegance and finality, cutting down Twin Sabers agents and breaking their lines.

Jian barely noticed.

His whole world had narrowed to two blades—and one man.

Yan Tianshou snarled and twisted his blades in a crisscross—one overhead, one low—forcing Jian to leap back.

“You’re not the boy I saw in Snowpine,” Yan muttered. “But I’ll break you just the same.”

Jian’s gaze didn’t waver.

“No, Yan Tianshou. You’re the one who hasn’t grown.”

And then—

He moved.

The first step was Drifting Cloud Step, his body tilting at an impossible angle, sliding beneath the high arc of the saber. His foot pivoted. He was behind Yan before the second saber finished its arc.

Clang—! The Whispering Steel left its sheath not with a shout, but a low hum like thunder waiting to rise. Jian did not hesitate.

A single slash — aimed at Yan’s spine.

But Yan was no fool. He twisted, his sabers crossing behind him in a spiral of qi. Steel rang against steel. Sparks danced.

The mist swirled, parted, and Whispering Steel began to sing.

Jian entered Petal Breeze again, but not as defense—this time as dance.

His body flowed like silk.

Each step whirled.

Each strike curved with elegance—sharp, sudden.

He deflected, ducked, and then—

Iron-Crane Descending.

A sudden vertical drop—his sword cleaved down with terrifying force, smashing into Yan’s shoulder and staggering the man for the first time.

Tianshou howled and slashed wildly.

Jian spun behind him.

A flash of steel across his thigh.

Blood sprayed.

Whispering Steel hummed with powerful intent.

“You’ve grown slow,” Jian said coldly.

Tianshou bellowed and fused qi into his sabers—his muscles bulging, his killing aura now a storm.

“Let’s see you block this!”

Both sabers flashed—spinning like a wheel of death.

But Jian lowered his stance.

And then he vanished.

When he reappeared, it was midair—above Yan’s head, the sun behind him. Whispering Steel carved a silver arc downward.

ShhhhhK-KRRK!

Blood sprayed the tea pavilion's red pillars.

Yan staggered, dropping to one knee, one saber severed from his hand.

The wind stilled.

Even the cries of battle seemed to fade as he took a deep breath.

And then—

He stepped forward.

Sword rising.

Qi swirling around him like a typhoon breaking its leash.

—Howl of the Free Sky.

A forward thrust, bursting with unstoppable momentum.

The clouds parted.

The wind screamed.

The air itself seemed to tear.

The blade pierced both sabers—

Then Yan Tianshou’s chest.

Time froze.

A gust blew maple leaves across the blood-stained street.

Jian stepped back, sheathing his sword in one clean motion as Yan stumbled.

The man looked down at the blood blooming from his chest—then up at Jian.

Tianshou collapsed—his body falling into the pool of crimson he helped create.

A breathless silence followed, only the distant rustle of river grass offering song.

Jian’s expression remained impassive. He wiped the blade clean with Yan’s sleeve before returning it to its sheath. This was not vengeance—it was war.

The surviving Twin Sabers agents hesitated.

Their general had fallen.

Jian stood alone in the center of the chaos, bathed in golden sunlight and shadow, the blade that cut through darkness.

His gaze swept the rooftops.

“Lan Kui,” he said softly, though the wind carried his voice far.

“This is your warning.”

Then he turned to the Lotus Heart disciples.

“Leave the rest to me. The bait is set.”

The inner hall of Twin Sabers Hall was thick with mist. Incense coils smoked from dragon-carved braziers, but their scent could not mask the rot in the air.

Lan Kui sat upon the high black stone dais, Iron Lotus Sword across his knees.

His fingers drummed lightly along the hilt.

A single young disciple stumbled through the fog-filled doors, his breathing ragged, robes torn, blood on his lip.

"Sect Master—!" he gasped, falling to one knee.

Lan Kui didn’t look at him. He simply stared forward into the mist.

“Speak.”

The disciple gulped. “Y–Yan Tianshou… has fallen.”

Lan Kui’s fingers stopped drumming.

The silence that followed was unnatural. The mist froze in the air like glass.

“Who?” he asked, though his voice remained cold.

“Jian,” the disciple whispered. “It was him… he killed senior Yan.”

For a moment, the entire hall trembled.

The Iron Lotus Sword pulsed with a violent black qi, and the mist thickened into choking, coiling streams like serpents slithering through the air.

Lan Kui rose slowly.

His presence was suffocating.

He stepped down from the dais, and the marble cracked beneath his foot.

“Did I not say,” he muttered, “to stay put… and wait?”

The disciple shivered.

“But now…” Lan Kui’s tone turned hollow. “He parades into Yunxiu alone. Kills my disciple. And walks free.”

He turned his eyes upon the disciple.

“Why would he do that… unless… he wanted me to move?”

The disciple dared not speak.

Lan Kui’s jaw clenched. “A trap, is it?”

A second figure appeared—Elder Shan gu, the last dissenting voice in Twin Sabers Hall, the one who had remained quiet so far.

“Master Lan Kui,” Wu Liang began, cautious. “Perhaps it is wise to hold our ground. This reeks of strategy—”

“Silence.” Lan Kui’s voice cracked like thunder. “If we cower now, what face will Twin Sabers Hall have left?”

He turned toward the darkened throne where the hall’s old masters once sat.

“Tianshou is dead. And if I stay here, what will the world say? That I feared a boy from sword valley? That Sword Valley’s stray dog baited me and I whimpered behind stone walls?”

Shan gu bowed slightly, but didn’t move.

“This is exactly what he wants,” Shan gu warned. “To pull you out. The other sects are gathering. Lotus Heart. Verdant Jade. Crimson Root. If we ride into Yunxiu, we may not ride out.”

Lan Kui stared into the brazier, his reflection flickering in the flame.

Then he smirked.

“Let them come. Let every sect burn beneath my sword.”

He turned toward the mist-veiled gates.

“Prepare the riders. I march at dawn.”

❧

Atop a hill overlooking Yunxiu Town, hidden by bamboo and wind, Jian stood with eyes closed, the Whispering Steel across his lap.

He felt the shift in the world’s qi—the way the air tightened, the stillness before the mountain moved.

A soft voice came behind him. Zhao Yan, standing in the moonlight, her cloak fluttering like a drifting cloud.

“He’s coming,” she said.

Jian opened his eyes.

“Yes.”

He stood, his aura solemn but sharp, like a blade unsheathed.

“Now the storm begins.”

# Chapter twenty four

## The sword divides the storm

Yunxiu Town, once serene beneath its weeping maples and quiet waterways, now roared with the fury of clashing blades. The morning mist had not lifted—it merely deepened the shadows of war.

Lotus Heart Pavilion disciples in pale lavender robes leapt across tiled roofs, their fans gleaming with threads of qi. Below, the disciples of Sword Valley advanced in tight formation, the symbol of the Broken Sword fluttering on their sashes as they swept through narrow alleys.

Among them, Hu Xiao and Zhu Yao fought back to back, clearing the streets of the last remnants of mercenary fighters who had infiltrated Yunxiu under Lan Kui’s orders.

Screams echoed, smoke curled from collapsed merchant stalls, and the metallic scent of blood hung thick in the air.

From the west, Verdant Jade Sect forces—clad in deep green robes with cloud-white sashes—intercepted a band of hired Qin mercenaries along the river path just before they could reinforce Yunxiu.

“Push them back to the riverside!” shouted Master Huo Ran, his spear whirling like a storm. “They shall not enter the town!”

His words were met with a battle cry from his disciples, their formation like a wall of jade cutting through the tide of mercenaries.

❧

Atop a hill overlooking the burning edges of Yunxiu, Jian stood beside Zhao Yan, his cloak flickering in the wind, Whispering Steel glimmering at his side.

He looked down at the chaotic town below—smoke curling, blades glinting, figures colliding—and inhaled slowly.

Zhao Yan’s eyes flicked to his.

“This is it.”

Jian nodded. “Let’s go.”

Together, they descended the hillside, stepping into the fury of war like two storms falling from heaven.

Jian’s arrival was immediate. Blades lunged toward him from ambushers lurking beneath shattered carts—he flicked his wrist.

Crimson Petal Descending.

The air shimmered with red light, and the mercenaries fell without breath.

Zhao Yan followed, her qi ribbons cutting through two more with razor precision.

Jian stepped forward, sword still sheathed, and raised his voice.

Even the wind held its breath.

From the charred ruins of vendor stalls to the shattered stone paths slick with blood, the battlefield stilled—as if the world itself awaited what would come next. Clouds swirled overhead, thick and low, as if drawn by the murderous qi radiating from the warriors below.

On the eastern ridge, Lan Kui appeared like a phantom king atop a black stallion, cloaked in steel-threaded silk. The Iron Lotus Sword was strapped to his back like a curse, the crimson-gold sheath flickering with faint pulses of malevolent qi. Beside and behind him, rows upon rows of Twin Sabers Hall elite disciples fanned out—silent, masked, unmoving. Their armor glinted in the pale light like teeth.

They marched with synchronized steps, each one falling like a drumbeat of impending doom.

Across the field, Jian stood tall at the front of the allied forces, his black hair stirring gently in the breeze, the silver threads of his cloak stained with ash and streaks of blood from the earlier skirmishes. Whispering Steel hung at his left side, humming faintly with its own battle thirst. At his right stood Zhao Yan, elegant and poised, her qi flaring in a calm blue flame.

Around them, Sword Valley’s remaining disciples, Lotus Heart Pavilion’s warriors, and the Verdant Jade Sect’s forces formed a multi-sect phalanx. Their banners fluttered, torn but defiant. Elder Mo Cang, despite his injuries, stood resolute beside his student. Hu Xiao adjusted his spear. Zhu Yao cracked her knuckles and muttered, “He’s uglier in person.”

The air itself crackled with the weight of history.

This was not just a battle. It was reckoning.

Lan Kui raised a single hand, and his army came to a complete stop with machine-like precision. The silence that followed was suffocating. The Iron Lotus Sword pulsed at his back like a beating war drum.

He spoke, voice like gravel dipped in venom.

“Xiangjian’s scattered insects. You gather like moths, fluttering toward your deathfire. Even together, you will break.”

Jian stepped forward alone, boots echoing across the cracked stones of the ruined street. Each step felt heavier than the last—but his resolve burned brighter.

He stopped, met Lan Kui’s cold gaze across the killing field, and drew Whispering Steel with one fluid motion.

The sound of its unsheathing rang through the air like a bell tolling for war.

“Lan Kui,” Jian’s voice carried like the whisper of a storm, “your crimes will end here. You may have stained the Iron Lotus, but your blood will wash it clean.”

Lan Kui let out a twisted smile, eyes glinting.

Lan Kui laughed. A hollow, chilling sound.

“You’re but a shadow cast by greater swords. Let’s see how long your light lasts.”

Behind Jian, Zhao Yan raised her arm. The signal was understood across sect lines.

“Form up,” she commanded. “No one falters. Not today.”

The warriors of Sword Valley, Lotus Heart Pavilion, and Verdant Jade Sect braced—blades raised, feet firm. Behind them, the people of Yunxiu peeked from shuttered homes, their town now the eye of a storm centuries in the making.

Jian’s robes danced gently in the wind, untouched by fear. At his side, Whispering Steel glimmered faintly in its scabbard, humming quietly with each breath he took. His hair was tied back in a simple warrior’s knot, and his eyes held the stillness of an autumn lake.

Lan Kui stepped forward, sword trailing behind him, gouging the earth.

“You killed my disciple,” Lan Kui said, his voice calm yet cold, like a blade dipped in frost.

Jian’s answer was silence. He unsheathed Whispering Steel and held it before him in one hand, the tip angled slightly down, as if bowing toward the battlefield.

The crowd fell silent.

The clouds parted slightly, allowing one thin shaft of twilight to illuminate the two of them—one robed in ghost-black, one in imperial violet—both levitating slowly, feet leaving the ground as qi surged beneath their soles.

They rose above the bridge, twenty feet, then forty, until they stood midair like gods descended to settle a grudge.

Below, the wind fell still.

The world faded into a distant murmur.

Only they remained.

Lan Kui lifted the Iron Lotus Sword.

Jian raised Whispering Steel.

The entire sky seemed to exhale.

Lan Kui struck first.

A downward cleave that split the sky in two. The arc of his sword unleashed a Violet Lotus Wave, a spiraling torrent of qi shaped like a lotus blooming in death. It tore through the sky, aimed straight at Jian.

But Jian was already gone.

A side-flash—Shadow-Chasing—his form flickering like mist. He reappeared beside Lan Kui and swung, Whispering Steel lashing outward with the Mirror Rain Arc, scattering a spiral of silver droplets.

Lan Kui parried with ease, his strength thundering back at Jian like a collapsing mountain. The force flung Jian downward into a rooftop, tiles exploding under the impact. Jian rolled mid-air and launched upward again, aura blazing.

They collided.

Steel screamed.

Each clash unleashed shockwaves that tore apart nearby rooftops, cracking stone bridges and igniting lanterns as their flames were pulled violently into the qi storm.

Lan Kui had the upper hand.

His cultivation was sword soul , nearing the boundary of sword saint. His blows were relentless, vicious, each strike carrying decades of killing intent. Jian was fast, fluid—but he lacked endurance.

Soon, blood lined his robe.

His left shoulder was torn open by a glancing blow. His cheek split. His qi dimmed.

Lan Kui smirked in mid-air, spinning into a thunderous horizontal arc—Double Lotus Severance. Jian blocked with both hands on Whispering Steel, but the force drove him through the upper stories of a watchtower, crashing through walls before skidding across the ruined courtyard.

❧

Smoke curled from the scorched streets as the first clash erupted in the narrow alleys of Yunxiu’s east side. Zhu Yao perched atop a fallen cart, dual daggers already bloodied, her small frame moving like lightning between shadow and flame.

“Don’t let them breach the courtyard!” she shouted, voice shrill but commanding.

Beside her, Hu Xiao’s spear whirled in wide, punishing arcs. A wave of mercenaries in piecemeal armor rushed from the alley, war cries echoing. Hu Xiao moved forward, precise and brutal—his spear crashing through shields, splitting helms, and cracking ribs with the rhythm of a war drum.

“Zhu Yao—left!”

Without looking, Zhu Yao spun midair and threw a dagger. It embedded in a Twin Sabers disciple’s neck, blood spurting as he fell.

“I got him!” she yelled, eyes gleaming. “That’s three for me!”

“We're not counting kills!” Hu Xiao growled, blocking a saber slash and countering with a crushing elbow to the attacker’s jaw.

“Then why are we even here!?”

Their line held—but barely. Smoke and debris clouded the way. Above them, archers from Lotus Pavilion loosed arrow after arrow, while civilians trapped in nearby homes huddled and prayed. The first tide had come.

And it would not be the last.

At Yunxiu’s central square, Zhao Yan led a formation of Lotus Heart and Verdant Jade disciples, her long red robes fluttering like a banner of fire.

“Circle formation! Interlock blades!”

From every street leading into the square, Twin Sabers Hall disciples emerged—uniform, disciplined, and lethal. Their blades shone with darkened qi, and their eyes were hard as obsidian.

Zhao Yan moved to the front, sword raised in a glimmering salute. Her blade, Scarlet Whisper, rang once as she activated her inner qi.

The world slowed.

A moment passed.

And then—

Zhao Yan surged forward, cutting the vanguard down in a graceful, deadly spin. Her sword left trails of crimson flame in the air as she danced through the enemy ranks.

“On me!” she called, her voice clear even over the sound of steel.

Her squad followed like a tidal wave. Lotus Heart disciples focused on formation disruption, while Verdant Jade flanked, their agility turning enemy lines into chaos.

A massive enemy cultivator surged forward with a growl—his saber infused with raw force.

Zhao Yan met him head-on.

Their blades clashed with a flash of fire and thunder.

On the southern slope overlooking Yunxiu’s battlefield, Jian stood alone—cloak rippling in the rising wind, Whispering Steel drawn and vibrating with qi. His eyes traced the battlefield like a general and a predator both.

Below, Lan Kui’s elite guards—clad in ink-black armor, faces masked, moving in synchronized formations—marched toward the town center.

Jian exhaled.

His body shimmered with qi. The sword in his hand hummed with restrained fury.

“It begins.”

He leapt.

One step—he was airborne.

Second step—he blurred.

Third—he descended like a thunderclap.

He landed in the heart of Lan Kui’s front ranks like a meteor. A shockwave pulsed outward, throwing soldiers from their feet. Before any could react, Whispering Steel sang.

“—Crimson Petal Descending.”

He cleaved through five at once, his blade moving like falling blossoms in a breeze. His footwork was fluid, impossible to follow.

Steel clanged. Blood sprayed.

A spear thrust toward him from the side—he spun, knocking it aside, delivering an elbow strike to the attacker’s throat. Another blade slashed at his back—he ducked and countered in a blur.

The world around Jian slowed as his mind sharpened.

“—Iron-Crane Descending.”

A full sweep silenced a squad. Their bodies fell like felled bamboo, limbs splayed, weapons clattering.

And yet—they kept coming.

Ten, twenty, thirty soldiers, desperate to stop him.

“—Howl of the Free Sky.”

Jian’s sword burst with a resonant hum, and the heavens themselves seemed to tremble. A visible arc of qi exploded forward like a dragon’s roar, flattening the front lines.

He stood alone at the edge of carnage, his cloak torn, breathing steady, eyes unwavering.

And then—Lan Kui arrived.

On horseback, flanked by his final elite guard. His black robes shimmered with dark qi. He dismounted, eyes locking with Jian’s.

The air between them tightened like a drawn bow.

The end had begun.

❧

The eastern gardens of Yunxiu, once tranquil and perfumed with summer lotus, now burned.

Petals scattered across bloodied stone as Lady Meilan, serene even amid flames, strode through enemy lines with grace cloaked in destruction. Her robe, pale pink embroidered with white lotus, fluttered gently despite the carnage around her.

“Do not falter,” she spoke softly to her disciples. “Let your hearts remain as still as the pond.”

She drew no sword—her weapon was her fan, and with each motion, gossamer threads of qi sliced through armored foes with surgical precision. The fan opened like a lotus, shimmered with light, and blooms of cutting wind exploded outward.

By her side, Elder Yue Xiang, a slender man with ghost-pale eyes, moved like smoke. His technique, Heart Veil Mirage, was illusory. Each time a sabre aimed for him, it struck air—his form phasing just a step beyond.

Together, they carved a safe path for wounded civilians fleeing the battlefield, fending off ambushes and reinforcements sent by Lan Kui.

“Lan Kui fights like a brute,” Meilan murmured, folding her fan. “But his vision is too narrow. This battlefield has too many eyes.”

To the west, near Yunxiu’s blacksmith quarter, the battle was different—silent, precise, ruthless.

Master Huo Ran, elder swordsman of Verdant Jade Sect, moved ahead of his troops. His sword, Emerald Pulse, glowed faintly—its edge veiled in illusion. One moment he stood in plain view, and the next he’d vanished, only to appear again behind a dying enemy, sword clean and humming.

“Tighten the circle,” he ordered, voice cold. “Pick their officers. Leave the footmen.”

His strategy was to disrupt command—eliminating captains, commanders, messengers—until Lan Kui’s outer forces became disorganized.

Elder Fan Zhi, his opposite in temperament—gruff, fire-hearted—shouted like thunder.

“If it breathes, break its spine!”

He wielded a twin blade style, striking two enemies at once with brutal, sweeping blows. While Huo Ran struck silently from the mist, Fan Zhi shattered bones like a storm breaking trees.

Together, they formed a devastating push, cutting off one of Lan Kui’s major flanks and forcing his generals into retreat toward Yunxiu’s center.

Far from the main town, along the medicine trail leading toward Baihua Forest, a confrontation brewed that would shift the tides.

Elder Nian Xue of Crimson Root Sect, having finally chosen a side, stood with sleeves rolled and palms burning with vermillion qi. His sect had long remained neutral, playing both sides—but not today.

At his side was Bai Suyuan, physician and spiritual cultivator of Medicine Valley. Her calm presence soothed the wounded, but when provoked, she was a storm of wrathful precision.

“Thank you for coming, Bai Suyuan,” Nian Xue said, eyes forward as enemy riders approached.

“I’m here because blood should not be the only medicine spilled,” she replied.

Their ambushers—mercenaries from the Qin borderlands hired by Lan Kui—charged in.

Nian Xue opened his palm, casting Crimson Sutra Binding Roots. From the earth rose bladed vines, sharp as steel and laced with venomous qi, entangling and severing men and mounts alike.

Bai Suyuan followed with Pulse Severing Palm—a technique so precise it halted the heartbeat of an enemy with a single strike.

This skirmish never made it to Yunxiu.

They stopped it cold in the woods.

At the front gate of Yunxiu, Elder Mo Cang walked with a slight limp from his hidden injury, but his gaze was steel. His sword, Iron Flame, was strapped across his back like an iron beam waiting to be swung.

Behind him surged the main host of Sword Valley—disciples in grey and blue, determined and vengeful.

“We have one goal,” Mo Cang said. “Bring Lan Kui to his knees. And none of you will die in vain.”

Then he drew his sword.

A wave of heat emanated as he struck the ground, a flame ring bursting outward, turning enemy formations into disarray. He fought with both force and inspiration—disciples rallied behind him, forming waves of strikes to push deeper into Yunxiu’s gates.

Each flank pushed forward, corralling Lan Kui’s forces into a shrinking ring.

Jian, Zhao Yan, and their elite squad began their push toward the final confrontation—where Lan Kui now stood waiting, gripping the Iron Lotus Sword, eyes filled with fury and destiny.

The great sects of the region, divided for so long, had finally marched together.

The center of Yunxiu was ablaze.

The skies above rippled with sword auras, and the buildings around the main plaza lay cracked and broken—caught between qi bursts from two titanic forces.

Jian stood alone before the enemy commander, sword in hand, breath steady but labored. All around them, disciples clashed, blades met steel, and cries rang through alleyways—but here, at the plaza’s broken heart, there was only silence.

Across him stood Lan Kui, eyes burning like forged steel, his Iron Lotus Sword already glowing a dark crimson, pulsing with a maddened sword will. He said nothing. His presence was enough to weigh down the air, as if space itself buckled under the pressure of his cultivation.

“You’re no longer a child hiding in Zexin,” Lan Kui said, raising his blade. “But you’re still not me.”

Jian didn't reply. His eyes narrowed, and he stepped forward—Whispering Steel gleaming like moonlight drawn across a battlefield soaked in memory.

They clashed.

Their swords rang out like thunder, waves of qi erupting with each strike.

Lan Kui’s swings were brutal—filled with the weight of a man who crushed rebellion and silenced betrayal. Jian countered with the refined precision of the Sword Heart Sutra, his forms—Petal Breeze, Iron-Crane Descending, and Howl of the Free Sky—dancing between offense and evasion.

But Lan Kui was stronger.

He forced Jian back with every blow, a relentless tide of strength and fury. Every clash jolted Jian’s bones. Every parried strike cost him more qi. And still, Jian refused to yield.

“You think you can stand where Xiao Ruhai stood?” Lan Kui spat, slamming Jian’s blade aside. “He was a lion. You are still a cub!”

Jian stumbled, sweat and blood mixing on his face, but he stayed standing—eyes blazing not with pride, but responsibility.

“If I fall here…” he whispered, “...then no one rises tomorrow.”

And again, he charged.

❧

They fought beneath falling ash, between broken flags, and amidst the shattered stone of Yunxiu.

Lan Kui’s blade whirled with demonic energy—Thousand Strikes of Iron Bloom—while Jian responded with the refined sequences of the Whispering Steel Path, but each time, he was pushed to the edge.

His body was slowing. The weight of his losses, the cost of the war, the exhaustion of relentless battle—all dragged him down.

Lan Kui saw it. And he smiled.

“You’ve lost.”

He surged forward.

One strike.

Jian blocked—but barely. His sword groaned under the weight. The blow cracked his shoulder guard, sending him spinning back.

Second strike.

Lan Kui roared—his sword came down like judgment.

Jian raised Whispering Steel—but he was too slow.

The Iron Lotus Sword crashed into his chest, the blow tearing through flesh, metal, and soul. There was a sickening crunch—a burst of blood—and Jian flew back, skidding across broken tiles and coming to a stop on his back, facing the sky.

The world tilted.

His chest burned, pain blooming like wildfire in his nerves. His limbs were heavy, breath ragged, qi nearly extinguished. His vision blurred—but the sky above was clear, painted in hues of dusk and steel smoke.

Silence.

He could hear only the wind, faint cries in the distance, the crackle of fire somewhere behind him.

And his own heartbeat.

“Is this… where it ends?”

“No... not yet...”

He tried to move, and agony answered.

Blood seeped from the deep wound across his chest—a killing blow by all accounts.

But Jian’s hand still twitched, still reached toward the sword lying just inches away.

From the edge of the battlefield, Zhao Yan screamed his name.

And far behind, Hu Xiao’s blade cut down another foe to get closer.

But Jian didn’t hear them.

He was staring into the sky, into the stillness between life and death.

Into a memory.

Above him, Lan Kui landed softly, calmly—like a man delivering justice, not murder. His heavy steps crunched toward Jian with measured satisfaction.

"That’s it?" Lan Kui’s voice curled like smoke. “All the stories… all the songs about you, and this is what I get? Another boy who thought he could play hero.”

His words echoed dimly, like sounds from the bottom of a well.

The sky above Yunxiu shimmered with smoke and light, where fire met falling dusk.

Jian lay motionless, breath thin and ragged, staring upward as the battlefield blurred around him. The chaos became a dull echo in his ears—the sound of swords clashing, boots stamping, voices screaming—all of it faded, distant, as though it belonged to a world he no longer touched.

Blood trickled down the side of his mouth. The Iron Lotus Sword had struck true.

His chest was torn, the wound deep and vicious. Pain surged with every breath, but it was not just the agony of flesh—it was something deeper, colder.

Something hollow.

“Am I dying?”

He didn’t know. His body said yes. His soul… was uncertain.

The sky had never looked so wide.

Clouds drifted slowly like fading thoughts. The wind moved across the broken tiles of the battlefield, gentle as a mother’s hand, stirring ash and maple leaves in lazy spirals. His fingers twitched, still inches from Whispering Steel, its silver glint catching dying sunlight.

“Is this… what failure tastes like?”

Jian closed his eyes.

And in that darkness, memories rose.

Memories of Zexin

A sunny afternoon.

Zexin Village, bathed in warm gold.

His mother hanging herbs outside their home. His father sparring with him using wooden swords, laughing as Jian tripped over his own feet.

The sound of the forge. The smell of steamed buns.

The festivals. Lanterns.

Then the smoke.

The screams.

The fire.

The sky was red. The ground slick with blood.

Men in black masks storming homes. His master being impaled. His mother—her voice shrill with terror—rushing to shield him.

Then him.

Lan Kui.

Towering in violet robes, eyes unreadable, mouth curled in that same quiet smirk.

The Iron Lotus Sword gleamed as it slashed downward.

Jian’s fists clenched.

He could see his mother’s final expression. Hear his father’s cry.

Feel the weight of that moment—the precise, brutal second when childhood was torn away.

then was in Sword Valley, watching Qingsong swing his blade under a waterfall, splash and steel dancing as one.

“You’re too tense,” Qingsong had told him, laughing. “The sword is not your enemy. It’s your echo.”

He saw Xiao Ruhai seated beneath the moon, sipping tea, his voice calm:

“Power is heavy, Jian. But if you cannot carry it, others must suffer its weight.”

Then came his parents’ faces—flickering like ghost-flames in the ruins of Zexin. He saw them smiling, calling his name, and then burning. He tried to scream, but his voice was dust.

Then came Zhao Yan, her eyes shimmering beneath a canopy of red leaves.

“Don’t fall now,” she had whispered once. “You’re the only one still rising.”

He could not fall here.

Not now.

Not when this was only the beginning.

A tear slipped from the corner of his eye.

Was this what all their faith had led to?

Qingsong died because I was not strong enough.

The Valley bleeds because I wasn’t fast enough.

Even now, I lie broken before the one who started it all.

Lan Kui's laughter echoed somewhere nearby. Distant. Triumphant.

Jian clenched his fists. His arms trembled.

“Is this truly the end? The story of the broken disciple who rose too high… and fell?”

There were more. Many more.

Shadows behind shadows.

The benefactors who hired Twin Sabers Hall. The officials who turned their eyes. The true enemies of Zexin Village.

Lan Kui was just the first.

Jian’s knuckles whitened as blood-streaked fingers dug into the stone.

He lay there still

Not yet risen.

But not yet defeated.

Somewhere behind him, the cries of battle rose once more.

Zhao Yan called his name. Again. Again.

He heard her.

He felt her presence—like spring in a dying world.

“Wait for me,” he murmured.

❧

The battlefield was breaking.

Clamor echoed through Yunxiu Town like a storm tearing through a forest—shattered tiles, shattered will. Blades rang against each other in brutal rhythm, the sound of war turned into music of ruin.

Smoke drifted in curling plumes through the street, smudging the dying sunlight.

The ground where Jian had fallen was littered with bodies—some of Lan Kui’s disciples, some allies from Sword Valley. Blood soaked the cracked earth.

Jian still lay there, chest torn, unmoving but alive, eyes half-open, watching.

And now—

Zhao Yan stepped forward.

Her cloak was torn at the shoulders, her hair wild from battle. Her cheeks were streaked with blood—some her own, most not. In her hands, her curved lotus-blade hummed faintly, infused with qi that trembled with her rage.

“LAN KUI!” she shouted.

She walked across the clearing slowly, ignoring the gasps of her fellow disciples, ignoring the pain in her own limbs.

“You’ve taken too much from us already.”

Lan Kui turned.

Clad in pitch-black robes, his aura was like a collapsing star—pulling everything into his gravity. The Iron Lotus Sword glimmered in one hand, still warm from cutting Jian down.

“Oh?” he smiled faintly, stepping away from Jian’s unmoving form. “The girl who thinks honor means something.”

She didn’t wait for more. Zhao Yan struck—fast as wind between reeds, her sword dancing in arcs of white light.

Lan Kui parried lazily. Once. Twice.

Then with a casual step, he moved inside her guard and struck with his palm.

The blow landed against her abdomen like a thunderclap—sending her crashing into the side of a ruined column. The stone cracked with the impact. Dust and shards exploded outward.

She slumped, breath gone, sword falling from her grasp.

Jian’s eyes widened.

Lan Kui turned back toward him.

He reached forward, lifting Whispering Steel from the dirt. He turned it in his hands, running his thumb along the flat of the blade.

A strange resonance trembled through the steel. A vibration—not just physical, but spiritual.

Lan Kui paused.

The hum grew louder. The sword pulsed faintly with a low, melodic chime.

It was responding… not to him, but to the one who had forged it.

To its master.

His eyes widened.

Recognition struck like lightning.

“…Whispering Steel,” he whispered.

His gaze snapped back to the bloodied figure lying on the ground.

“You…” His voice cracked with disbelief. “You’re the boy who got away…”

“So this is the blade they whisper about. The one forged in myth, carried by a child pretending to be a master.”

“Let’s see how sharp it is—when it tastes the heart of someone he failed to protect.”

Zhao Yan lay barely conscious, eyes flickering as she tried to crawl away.

Lan Kui raised Whispering Steel.

“Farewell, little Lotus.”

Lan Kui stood over Zhao Yan, her blood painting the stones.

He raised Whispering Steel, poised for the killing blow.

And Jian—

Jian watched.

His breath had stopped.

His pulse faded.

His soul—

trembled.

Everything blurred.

Time shattered.

The world turned silent.

Sound, color, sensation—all gone.

All that remained was the image burned into his eyes:

Zhao Yan, broken on the earth.

Whispering Steel, in another’s hand.

The man who killed his parents, his brother-in-arms, and now came for her.

Crack.

A hairline fracture ripped across the stillness.

And then—the roar.

A blast of sound and force exploded from Jian’s body like a divine calamity—a horizontal gash of raw qi that screamed across the battlefield and hurled Lan Kui backwards, tearing the ground in its wake. Whispering Steel flew from his hand and clattered to the ground, singing as it landed.

Zhao Yan gasped.

Lan Kui stumbled, eyes wide.

Jian stood.

Not walked. Not crawled.

Stood.

In a blink.

His form rose like a ghost given flesh, hair blown upward by invisible wind, eyes blazing orange, molten and unnatural. His chest still bled, but the blood hissed as qi ignited within it, flames licking along his skin.

"You will not... touch her."

The sword responded.

Whispering Steel hummed—an ancient, unearthly tone—as if singing to its true master once more.

With a flick of thought, Jian leapt, his body erasing space, and descended upon Lan Kui like a falling star.

He didn’t fight like a man.

He attacked like rage given form.

Like something caged for years that had finally escaped.

A snarl ripped from his throat—not words, not reason.

Just fury.

Whispering Steel slashed—

One. Two. Ten times.

From every angle.

Lan Kui stumbled, parried, spun—but every movement felt sluggish against this onslaught. Jian’s qi was no longer refined—it was wild, chaotic, burning orange like wildfire caught in the breath of gods.

His blade danced like it had memory.

Blood sprayed in long arcs. Sparks scattered as steel clashed with steel. The ground cracked with each strike. Jian moved like a predator—relentless, merciless, a storm in flesh.

Each move folded into the Windstep Surge, enabling him to redirect, accelerate, and chain attacks with untraceable fluidity. He became the eye of a sword-typhoon, and Lan Kui—despite his immense strength—was battered and disoriented.

“You killed them!”

“You broke us!”

“You burned my home!”

A slash across his side. A stab through the thigh. A spinning kick to the ribs.

Each word was a strike.

Each strike left a scar on Lan Kui’s defense.

Then, a pause.

Jian stopped.

His face contorted—caught between man and beast—

And he screamed.

A sound that tore across the battlefield like a banshee’s cry, hands gripping his face, Whispering Steel still in his palm. His body glowed, qi swirling faster, faster—colors bending, as if the very air couldn’t contain him.

Lan Kui backed away, breathless, bleeding, truly afraid for the first time.

“W-What are you?!”

Jian's body flared red.

A deeper red than blood.

The color of wrath.

Of unleashed pain.

Of ten thousand uncried tears boiling over.

And he moved again.

Faster.

Harder.

Unseeable.

Whispering Steel now struck with voices—a chorus of forms born in battle and grief:

Crimson Petal Descending – not elegant now, but savage, each petal a cut.

Petal Breeze Slash – faster than breath, heavier than fate.

Howl of the Free Sky – echoed like thunder, ripping Lan Kui’s stance apart.

Lan Kui screamed, barely holding on.

Then—Jian split.

Four copies. Four identical Jian—all of them blazing red—came from four directions, eyes glowing like divine judgement, swords raised in unison.

Lan Kui turned to run—too slow.

Slash.

Slash.

Slash.

Silence.

All four blades connected.

One final Jian appeared, leaping over Lan Kui's shoulder as the other images faded, driving Whispering Steel straight through his heart.

It pierced armor, ribs, and soul alike.

Time stopped.

Jian stood, sword in Lan Kui’s chest, face empty.

Jian’s breath was ragged. But his voice was steel.

“You think this ends here?”

Lan Kui trembled. “I… I was just a blade, not the hand.”

“Then name the hand.”

Lan Kui faltered. His lips moved. “...The Benefactor.”

Jian’s heart stopped for half a beat.

Then—he twisted.

A horrible sound.

A final scream.

And then—

Lan Kui slumped forward, dead weight on the blade, body torn, soul severed, head tilted at an impossible angle, as his spirit dispersed in silence.

A gust of wind blew through Yunxiu Town. The blood-slick earth seemed to sigh, as if relieved that the storm had passed.

A pulse of residual qi rippled outward from Jian, shattering the oppressive stillness with a wave of pressure that knocked banners over and sent loose robes flapping.

The battlefield—fell still.

Not just the allies.

Not just the enemies.

All of them watched—their breaths caught, their blades forgotten.

Some trembled.

Some cried.

And at the center of it all stood Jian—red qi dispersing into glowing motes, face pale and chest heaving, Whispering Steel humming softly in the quiet.

Jian stood above Lan Kui’s corpse, his blade dripping blood. His robes torn and soaked, his eyes burning with unshed tears.

He turned slowly to the others on the field—rogue cultivators, Twin Sabers disciples, mercenaries from Qin.

And in a coarse, shattered voice, he growled:

“Who else?”

No one answered.

They dropped their weapons.

The boy from Zexin.

The last disciple of Sword Valley.

Now, the blade of heaven’s wrath.

The battlefield held its breath.

Whispering Steel had stilled.

Lan Kui’s body had fallen.

The roar of war had ceased.

Only the wind remained, rustling ash and broken banners.

And Jian…

Jian stood alone at the center, blood staining his robes, sword lowered.

Then—he turned.

Across the ruined courtyard, past broken stone and scattered weapons,

Zhao Yan stood, half-kneeling, her hand pressed to her side, blood on her sleeve, her hair loose and wind-tossed.

Their eyes met.

Jian’s breath caught in his throat.

All the crimson fury, the godlike wrath that had erupted from him…

vanished.

The red qi ebbed, turning translucent, then golden, and finally—

gentle.

A soft breeze stirred the petals of the battlefield’s scattered trees, curling around his body, as if the very sword that had become a storm had now turned into spring wind.

His eyes, once blazing with vengeance, softened with a quiet ache.

“Zhao Yan…”

She stood slowly, her gaze never leaving his.

A cut on her lip.

A tear at her shoulder.

But she was alive.

That was all that mattered.

Time slowed.

The battlefield blurred.

It was only the two of them now.

And he ran.

He ran as if the world would tear him apart again if he didn’t reach her in time.

His feet barely touched the ground—no longer the warrior god, no longer the weapon—just a man who could not bear to lose her.

Zhao Yan moved too, limping at first, then faster, arms open.

They collided in the middle of the battlefield with a crushing embrace, arms locking tightly, as if letting go might kill them both.

She buried her face in his shoulder.

He held her close, trembling now not from battle, but from the shattering release of fear.

“I thought I lost you,” she whispered, voice cracking.

“Never again,” he murmured back, his hand pressed to the back of her head. “I’ll never let anything take you away from me.”

Above them, the wind stirred again.

Petals—white, red, and pink—drifted down from the ruined trees as if summoned by heaven itself. The last blossoms of spring.

They fell around the two warriors in a silent celebration, a symbol of endings and beginnings.

And from the flanks of the battlefield, a sound rose.

First one voice.

Then another.

Cheers.

A cry from Sword Valley disciples.

A call from Lotus Heart Pavilion.

Verdant Jade Sect.

Even Crimson Root Sect.

Their voices rose together—not just in victory over Lan Kui—

But for Jian.

The disciple who forged his own fate.

The swordsmith who became a storm.

The warrior who refused to lose his heart.

Zhao Yan pulled back slightly, tears in her eyes. “You’re shaking.”

Jian smiled faintly, the kind of smile he hadn’t known since he was a boy. “I’ve never been more afraid in my life.”

She pressed her forehead to his.

“You don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

He nodded.

The petals continued to fall.

And in that moment, amidst the ruin of war and the hush of victory, love stood undefeated.

# Chapter twenty five

## Spring in the valley

The cheers still echoed, rising and falling across the blood-soaked plain like waves over broken stone.

But now, they began to quiet.

One by one, voices fell into silence as the elders and sect leaders stepped forward. The scent of blood lingered heavy in the air, but something else now overtook it—reverence.

Elder Mo Cang, bandaged and leaning on his sword, stepped through the fallen columns and rubble toward Jian. His face, worn with years and pain, softened as he looked at the young man standing among petals and ash.

“You did it,” he said quietly. “He’s gone.”

Jian bowed deeply, his arms still around Zhao Yan, who steadied him now. “We all did. I could not have won without Sword Valley. Or without the others.”

From the opposite side, Sect Master Huo Ran of Verdant Jade Sect approached, his green robes streaked with dust and blood, flanked by Elder Fan Zhi. They looked at Jian—no longer with the cautious diplomacy of rival sects, but with genuine admiration.

“You faced a Sword Soul cultivator and lived,” Huo Ran said, his voice like rolling thunder. “No. You won.”

Jian looked up. “Only because I stopped being afraid of losing everything.”

“Then you understand what makes a true leader,” said Lady Meilan of Lotus Heart Pavilion, her silver hair whipping in the wind. Her eyes, ever sharp and discerning, softened as she looked at Zhao Yan, who had stepped aside so Jian could stand tall. “You did not just save Sword Valley. You saved the balance of the martial world.”

From among the gathered figures, Elder Nian Xue of Crimson Root Sect stepped forward. Her expression was unreadable, but she nodded once, slowly.

“We remained neutral too long. But today proved that neutrality in the face of tyranny is cowardice. We will no longer stand on the sidelines.”

Then, to everyone’s surprise, Elder Wu Liang, the aging master from within Twin Sabers Hall who had stood against Lan Kui from the beginning, stepped forward. His robes were torn, and his sword arm bled freely, but he stood tall.

“There will be no more war from Twin Sabers Hall,” he said. “Those who stood with Lan Kui have fallen or fled. The rest will return to our old teachings. You have my word.”

A breath passed through the gathered sects. The clouds above had begun to part, and the first hint of evening sun broke through, casting a warm light over the ravaged field.

Jian sheathed Whispering Steel. The sword, now faintly glowing with a new kind of light—neither wrathful nor wild—seemed to hum with calm.

He turned to the gathered disciples of Sword Valley, who stood in rows behind Elder Mo Cang, bloodied but unbroken.

He raised his voice—not loud, but steady.

“The war is over.”

No one moved.

Jian continued, “But our duty is not. We will rebuild Sword Valley. We will restore what was lost—and we will do it together. With our allies at our side.”

Then, he turned to the others. “Let this day mark the end of sect wars driven by ego and vengeance. Let it be the day the jianghu remembered what it means to stand united.”

A silence hung over the field.

Then Elder Mo Cang raised his sword.

“Sword Valley stands with Jian.”

One by one, the others followed.

“Lotus Heart Pavilion stands with Jian,” said Lady Meilan.

“Verdant Jade Sect,” said Master Huo Ran.

“Crimson Root Sect,” said Elder Nian Xue, this time louder.

And finally, Elder Wu Liang, eyes closed, whispered: “Twin Sabers Hall—what remains of it—honors the warrior who forged peace.”

The blades rose to the sky.

The sun broke free from the clouds.

And in the center of it all, Jian stood with Zhao Yan by his side.

Later that night, as pyres were lit for the fallen and wounded were tended, Jian stood alone by a ruined wall, watching stars emerge above Yunxiu.

Zhao Yan joined him quietly.

“Do you think we’ve truly ended it?” she asked.

Jian took a long breath. “No. But we’ve started something new.”

She leaned on his shoulder. “You’re still afraid, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he admitted. “But I’ve learned that fear can be a guide. It shows me what matters.”

They stood there as the first fireflies of spring danced around them, and somewhere far off, a flute began to play—a sorrowful but hopeful tune.

The battle had ended—but its echoes still lingered in the smoke and silence.

Yunxiu Town stood scarred beneath a crimson sky. Cracked stones, fallen tiles, and the faint groans of the wounded formed the new rhythm of peace. Steel had quieted, but grief and healing filled its place.

From the far edges of the battlefield, a wave of white robes had swept in during the final clashes—not with swords, but with salves, needles, and radiant strands of medicinal qi.

Medicine Valley had not arrived late—they had been waiting for their moment.

Master Bai Suyuan moved through the wounded like a ghost of calm, his long sleeves flowing, his hand always resting for a brief moment on each patient’s chest or forehead before giving a quiet order. His presence brought discipline to chaos, and assurance to fear.

Beside him worked Yun Rou, focused and tireless. She had grown—not only taller, but in skill, her movements precise and steady, her voice firm as she directed healer teams and stabilized critical injuries.

They had both been present the entire time—not as warriors, but as the battlefield’s final safeguard.

Now, with the enemy defeated and order returning, they moved through the aftermath, tending to every disciple they could reach—Sword Valley, Lotus Heart Pavilion, Verdant Jade Sect, even captured mercenaries. None were turned away.

Jian found them near the half-destroyed eastern shrine, where they were treating a Sword Valley elder who’d lost consciousness after shielding two juniors from a collapsing pavilion.

“Master Bai,” Jian said, stepping forward, his voice hoarse but steady.

Bai Suyuan turned. His face, always composed, shifted just slightly—softening into something between pride and relief. “Jian.”

They exchanged a silent bow.

“You fought beyond yourself,” Bai said. “But you returned to yourself in the end. I was watching.”

“Then you saw me nearly lose it,” Jian murmured, looking down.

“I saw you regain control when it mattered most,” Bai replied, glancing toward Zhao Yan, who stood beside Jian, quiet and steady.

Before more could be said, Yun Rou turned from her patient and looked up. “Jian-ge?”

Her eyes lit up. She rushed over, her robes flecked with blood and ash, her braid loosened from hours of work. “You’re not dead!”

He chuckled weakly. “Not yet.”

She punched his shoulder lightly, then winced as if remembering his wounds. “I was terrified. When you fell, the entire battlefield—”

“I’m sorry,” Jian said, voice quiet. “For worrying you.”

“You always do.” She sighed, then smiled. “But not everyone gets to say their brother defeated a Sword Soul with fire in his veins and blossoms falling from the sky.”

Zhao Yan smiled gently from beside him. “He does have a flair for the dramatic.”

Yun Rou looked between them, a glint of mischief rising in her tired eyes. “So… are you two…?”

Zhao Yan merely took Jian’s hand.

Jian rolled his eyes. “We’re going to Medicine Valley. Together. That’s enough for now.”

Behind them, Hu Xiao limped forward with a torn sleeve and a half-eaten bun he’d snatched from a supply cart. “Good. Let the rest of us deal with cleaning up the mess while you lovebirds go soak in springwater and get pampered by Yun Rou.”

“You’ll get your bath too,” Yun Rou snapped. “After your sixth round of bandaging.”

Hu Xiao groaned.

Bai Suyuan stepped forward, his voice gentle but firm. “Take the time you need. There will be decisions to make, tribunals to hold, wounded to settle. But for now—you’ve earned peace.”

Jian looked at them—his master, his friend, his sister, his comrade—and nodded.

As the sun dipped low behind the torn roofs of Yunxiu Town, a quiet caravan of Medicine Valley carriages and mounts began to depart.

Zhao Yan rode beside Jian, their shoulders brushing as the wind whispered gently over the path.

Behind them, Yun Rou sat in the rear carriage, organizing poultices and teasing Hu Xiao between scoldings.

And standing at the town’s edge, Bai Suyuan watched his disciples disappear into the horizon.

Victory had been won.

But healing—that would take time.

And time had finally begun.

The battle was over.

The war had ended.

But in Medicine Valley, life began again—quietly.

Nestled between cloud-kissed cliffs and flowering terraces, the valley became a sanctuary of mist and balm. The scent of crushed herbs mingled with the breeze, and morning dew clung to the delicate white bridges that arched across its spring-fed rivers.

Jian awoke each day in a quiet pavilion beneath the plum trees, the whisper of leaves replacing the clangor of swords. His wounds had run deep—both in flesh and spirit—but under the hands of Master Bai Suyuan and Yun Rou, the worst had been mended.

The rest would take time.

But he was not alone.

Zhao Yan stayed nearby, her own injuries less severe, her quiet strength undiminished. Each morning, she would arrive at Jian’s room with fresh tea and books—sometimes poetry, sometimes cultivation texts—and sit beside him as the light streamed in through the paper doors.

At first, they spoke sparingly. Recovery was its own language—silent glances, shared breaths, slow smiles. But soon, the silences gave way to laughter, to confessions whispered beneath moonlight in the gardens, to late-night strolls beneath lanterns swinging in the breeze.

One evening, Jian brought her to the lotus pond nestled deep in the valley’s rear courtyard. There, beneath a weeping willow, he showed her the faint glow of Whispering Steel’s core now fully restored and bound with new spirit patterns.

“It’s calm now,” he said, watching the soft pulse of light within its blade. “Like me, I think.”

She leaned gently against him. “Then let’s keep it that way.”

Elsewhere in the valley, Hu Xiao and Yun Rou discovered their own rhythm—though it was less graceful and far more chaotic.

“You are not drinking that,” Yun Rou snapped one afternoon, yanking a steaming concoction from his hand.

“It smells like death and boiled feet!”

“It’ll restore your spleen meridian!”

“I like my spleen how it is!”

They argued daily.

But every argument ended with her sighing and applying balm to his bruises, or him sneaking candied plums into her satchel. She called him an idiot, he called her a tyrant, but every accidental brush of hands lingered a little longer.

Late one evening, Hu Xiao brought her an armful of wild azaleas he'd stumbled on while climbing near the cliff paths.

“For your medicinal experiments,” he muttered, ears red.

Yun Rou looked at the flowers, then at him.

“You’re impossible,” she said.

Then kissed him on the cheek.

❧

One month passed in the blink of an eye.

Jian stood at the gates of Medicine Valley once more, fully recovered, clad in a new set of dark robes inscribed with Sword Valley’s insignia. Whispering Steel hung by his side—resonant, quiet, whole.

Zhao Yan rode beside him, her eyes forward, her heart light.

Zhu Yao—gruff and composed—waited patiently with the horses, nodding to each of them in silent approval.

Hu Xiao dragged his feet until Yun Rou appeared with a basket of food and an herbal satchel.

“Don’t do anything reckless,” she said, poking him in the chest.

“I’ll try not to.”

“And don’t forget to take these twice a day.”

“Yes, yes, doctor tyrant.”

She shoved the satchel into his hands.

He grinned and kissed her forehead before jogging to his mount.

As they descended the path from the valley, the wind picked up, fluttering the petals from the trees above. Jian looked back one last time.

At the quiet hills where peace had found them.

At the people who had helped him become whole again.

Then he turned forward.

“Sword Valley awaits,” he said softly.

Zhao Yan nodded. “Let’s go home.”

And the four of them rode into the dawn.

Together.

The fires of war had long cooled, but change still moved quietly through the lands like mist curling over morning grass.

In Sword Valley, peace had returned—along with its people.

The forging halls once again rang with the rhythm of hammers on steel. The disciples trained in the courtyards with laughter, and the scent of pine and incense drifted down from the inner sanctums like a memory of prayer.

But in the quiet heart of the valley, deeper transformations stirred.

One dawn, before the clouds had fully cleared the valley rim, Hu Xiao stood beside Jian beneath the old cedar archway of the sect’s southern cliff.

He had removed the Verdant Jade insignia from his robe and held it now in both hands.

“I’ve thought about it,” he said, voice quiet. “The wars, the blood… Verdant Jade has its path, but I no longer see mine in it.”

Jian looked at him—no longer the impulsive, sharp-tongued fighter who’d once stormed into Tianlu Tavern without a plan. He was grounded now, tempered by fire and friendship.

“Then stay,” Jian said. “Sword Valley welcomes you.”

Hu Xiao grinned. “Only if I get a better room than Zhu Yao.”

“I’ll make it happen.”

They clasped forearms in the warrior’s grip. No need for more words.

❧

Sword Valley’s main hall had never held so many masters of name and legend under one roof. Its heavy doors had been opened wide, and the fading crimson of dusk filtered in like a silk veil, painting the once-austere chamber in molten hues. Incense burned faintly at the altar. The valley’s ancestral sword stood in its mount, untouched.

Jian stood at the foot of the dais, cloaked not in ceremony, but in the quiet austerity of plain black robes, the hem frayed and dusted with as

from Yunxiu. Whispering Steel remained sheathed at his back, its presence humming with contained power—almost as if it too awaited this decision.

To his left stood Elder Mo Cang, arms folded within the sleeves of his stone-gray robe, gaze calm and steady.

To his right stood Senior Disciple Luo Yue, her face expressionless, sword Rainveil leaning beside her. Cold, composed, but the small twitch in her brow betrayed something—concern, or perhaps disbelief.

Before him sat the coalition of sect leaders and elders who had aided in the downfall of Lan Kui.

At the center, draped in flowing robes of glacial blue and silver lotus patterns, sat Sect Master Lady Meilan of the Lotus Pavilion, eyes closed in serene poise. Beside her stood Elder Yue Xiang, tall, refined, and sharp-eyed.

On her left was Sect Master Huo Ran of the Verdant Jade Sect, fingers tapping the pommel of his sword as if eager to speak. Elder Fan Zhi stood beside him with quiet deference.

To the right, Elder Nian Xue of the Crimson Root Sect observed all with a scholar’s detachment, his fan half-raised before his mouth.

And among them—most surprisingly—stood Elder Wu Liang of Twin Sabers Hall, the only senior to denounce Lan Kui’s descent into corruption. His aged face was drawn with remorse, yet unwavering in dignity.

They had all borne the weight of war. And now, they had gathered to weigh something else:

What came after.

Lady Meilan opened her eyes.

“Jian,” she said, voice clear and calm as still water. “We are prepared to recognize you not merely as the Master of Sword Valley, but as the uniting pillar of the Xiangjian Guild itself. The deeds you’ve done… no one here denies them.”

A few heads nodded in somber agreement.

Jian’s gaze swept over the assembled elders. “What I’ve done,” he said slowly, “was not to ascend a throne, but to bury a rot.”

He stepped forward and turned toward Elder Mo Cang. “I have no desire to rule Sword Valley.”

There was a ripple through the room.

Luo Yue’s fingers tightened on her sword. Mo Cang raised a brow but said nothing.

Jian continued, “Elder Mo Cang has led the valley in spirit longer than any of us. When the fires of war raged and our disciples bled in the fields, it was he who forged their blades, taught them their footing, guided their resolve. He understands the will of the sword.”

Mo Cang took a deep breath. “Jian…”

But Jian turned instead to the girl beside him.

“Luo Yue,” he said. “You have always been my equal in the blade—and beyond it, in reason. I entrust the next generation to you.”

Her lips parted slightly, the first crack in her icy composure. A long silence passed between them, unspoken emotions hidden beneath years of sparring and loyalty. Then she nodded, her voice nearly a whisper.

“I will not fail.”

Satisfied, Jian stepped back and faced the assembly.

“I am abdicating the seat of Valley Master,” he declared. “Effective immediately.”

Mo Cang glanced at him. “And what will you do?”

Jian's voice was quiet, but unyielding. “There are still shadows beyond our borders. Still enemies who wear the mask of peace. Zexin’s blood does not end with Lan Kui. The one he called Benefactor still walks free.”

A tense murmur rippled through the coalition. Even Huo Ran leaned forward. “This… Benefactor. Do you know who they are?”

“No,” Jian answered. “But I intend to find out.”

There was a pause.

Then Elder Wu Liang of Twin Sabers Hall stood.

“Let it be known,” he said, “that though Twin Sabers Hall fell to corruption under Lan Kui’s hand, we are not all lost. I will return and rebuild our sect with those who still hold the Way of the Twin Edge in their hearts. And should you require steel or shadow, Jian—you may call on me.”

Jian nodded, sincerely.

Lady Meilan stood next.

“Lotus Pavilion will send emissaries to support Sword Valley’s reconstruction,” she said. “You may have walked away from leadership, but your sword still carries weight among us.”

As each elder gave their word, a quiet reverence settled upon the chamber.

Sword Valley was no longer just a bastion of blades. It was a symbol. A forge that had tempered a boy into a storm. And now, that storm was leaving once more.

Outside, twilight had settled into deep indigo.

The moment Jian stepped out of the main hall, wind rustled through the pine branches—cool and biting, like mountain steel. Behind him, Sword Valley had begun its long healing. But ahead, the road bent toward places unknown.

He inhaled deeply, letting the mountain air fill his lungs.

❧

The sky rippled in soft hues of amber and rose, sunlight slipping like golden silk across the treetops as the wind stirred gently through the Valley of Petals. Here, the land spread like a painter’s scroll — a wide basin filled with cascading terraces of peach blossoms. The trees swayed in lazy arcs, petals falling like quiet snow, brushing Jian’s hair and shoulders as he walked slowly down the winding path.

Each step sent tiny puffs of pale pink blossoms across the air.

At the foot of the valley, where the petals thickened like a carpet, Zhao Yan stood waiting beneath a great old peach tree whose roots curled over ancient stones and whose canopy burned with the last fire of day.

She wore a flowing robe of soft plum and ivory, the sleeves embroidered with misty mountains and cranes in flight. Her silver hairpin glinted in the light, and a red tassel fluttered with the wind.

In the center of the glade sat Zhu Yao, robed in soft autumn gold, her sleeves folded neatly as she adjusted the zither across her lap. Her fingers hovered above the strings, poised in stillness, her expression composed but warm.

She looked at him — fully, clearly — and stepped forward. The wind tugged at her sleeves, curling the petals between them. “let me give you something to carry with you.”

When Zhu Yao struck the first note, the world tilted.

It wasn’t a loud sound. It didn’t need to be. The melody she conjured rose like morning mist—subtle, wistful, drawn from the quiet rivers of home and the dreams left behind.

Zhao Yan untied her outer robe, letting it fall softly to the grass, revealing a thinner gauze layer beneath, draped and floating like a silken mist. She raised her arms slowly, taking a step back, and the music began — low and wistful, a haunting melody that stirred the leaves and pulled at the heart.

And then, she danced.

Zhao Yan's movements were like flowing ink — measured, deliberate, and unfathomably graceful. Her hands swept the air as though painting wind currents, and her body turned in arcs that mimicked the circling petals above her. She leapt lightly, like a crane taking flight, her sleeves trailing behind like waves.

The dance was not rushed. It was dignified, ancient — a ritual once performed for warriors going into exile, or to war, a rare gift for those who might never return.

As she spun, the sunset struck her face, haloing her in a warm glow. Her expression remained calm, but her eyes burned — filled with all the things she would never say aloud.

Jian didn’t blink.

He had seen Zhao Yan fight like a tempest, he had seen her wounded and bleeding, seen her burning with fury—but never like this. Never so vulnerable. So free.

Jian stood motionless, watching her with a stillness that could only come from reverence. This wasn’t a dance of love declared. It was love mourned before loss. A farewell spoken in movement and music, as twilight thickened.

The wind stirred gently. Blossoms stirred with her, curling around her figure as if drawn to her flame. The music rose and fell, guided by Zhu Yao’s steady hands, her eyes misty as she played.

Jian’s hand unconsciously gripped the stone beneath him.

He wanted to freeze time.

He wanted to remember her like this forever—strong and beautiful, dancing beneath the twilight for him alone.

When the final note faded into the air, silence swept the valley like a tide.

Zhao Yan stopped moving.

She stood beneath the central plum tree, chest rising with breath, her hair wind-tossed and strewn with petals.

Zhu Yao slowly set her hands down and looked up with a soft, knowing smile.

Zhao Yan stepped forward.

“You didn’t blink the whole time,” she whispered, a teasing glint in her eyes.

“I didn’t dare,” Jian replied. “I was afraid I’d miss something.”

“I don't know when I’ll be able to follow you to the zhongdu plains,” she said quietly. “But I will.”

Jian stepped forward. “And I’ll wait.”

She smiled faintly and looked toward the distant horizon, where the golden light had melted into deep lavender. “Do you know the name of this dance?”

He shook his head.

“Wind That Waits on the Shore. It was once performed by generals’ wives when their husbands sailed into the southern wars. It’s meant to carry a wish into the wind... and call someone home.”

Jian stepped closer and reached for her hand. She allowed it, and for a moment, neither said anything. They stood beneath the falling petals, two shadows drawn together in the last warmth of day.

“I thought I understood grief,” Jian murmured. “But parting with you now… it feels heavier than any sword I’ve lifted.”

Zhu Yao quietly stood, dusting her robes, giving them the space they needed. She walked toward the edge of the glade, letting the petals fall across her arms as if she too were remembering something long lost.

The petals kept falling.

Time moved again, but softly—like footsteps across silk.

Jian stood in the hush that followed the music, still half-lost in the vision of her dance. The ache of parting curled low in his chest, not sharp, but deep—like something he'd known would come and had tried, uselessly, to prepare for.

Zhao Yan stepped closer. The fading twilight caught the glint of moisture in her eyes.

“I used to dance that as a child,” she said quietly, her voice brushing his senses like wind through bamboo. “Back when I didn’t understand what it meant.”

She looked up at him then, her gaze unwavering.

“But now… I do.”

Jian said nothing at first. The storm inside him, the one that had calmed only moments ago, began to stir again—not with fury, but with longing.

“I wish I could promise you peace,” he murmured. “But the path I walk… there will always be war at the edges of it.”

“I don’t need peace,” she whispered. “I just need to know you’ll wait for me.”

“I will.” His voice was steady now, a quiet vow in the falling dark. “For you, I’d cross every battlefield again.”

A soft laugh escaped her—half tear, half relief. “Even if I grow old waiting?”

“I’ll recognize you by your sword,” he smiled. “And by your dance.”

They were close now. Closer than the space between breaths. The glade, the trees, the world itself faded into nothing but the space they shared.

Zhao Yan’s hand found his—tentative at first, then firm. “Jian…”

He tilted his head, eyes catching hers. “Yes?”

“I—” Her voice faltered, but her gaze didn’t. “I don't know what we’ll become after this. But I want you to carry this with you. Something soft. Something real.”

Jian reached up, gently brushing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Then give it to me.”

And she did.

She rose on her toes, and he leaned in. No hesitation. No dramatic pull. Just the meeting of two hearts beating for each other, where only the truth of feeling remained.

Their lips met beneath the plum tree.

It was not a kiss of fire or frenzy—but of quiet promise. Of understanding forged through blood and survival. Her hand pressed to his chest, over the scar Lan Kui had left. His fingers rested at her waist, reverent, unshaking.

When they parted, the distance between them seemed almost sacred.

Zhao Yan touched her forehead to his once more.

❧

Night crept into the valley like ink soaking silk.

They sat side by side on a smooth stone bench beneath the peach tree, the lanterns from nearby pavilions casting long, warm shadows. The petals still drifted down. The wind had gone quiet, as though nature, too, was listening.

Jian rested Whispering Steel at his side.

“Do you believe,” he asked suddenly, “that the sword can remember?”

Zhao Yan turned to him. “What do you mean?”

“That it holds echoes. Of the people it’s served. The places it’s protected. The hands that shaped it.”

She looked at the blade in the fading light. “Then yours carries all of Zexin. All of us. That’s why it sings the way it does.”

They sat in silence again, until Zhao Yan stood, brushing down her robes.

“The horses will be ready soon.”

Jian rose too.

Zhu Yao, waiting near the trail, bowed politely and took the lead.

Zhao Yan walked him to the start of the path.

There, under the arching trees, she cupped his cheek softly, her thumb brushing the faint scar beneath his left eye. “Don’t die in Qin,” she said, quietly but firmly.

“I won’t,” Jian replied. “Not before I see you again.”

She leaned up slightly and pressed a kiss to his brow, brief but lingering — a benediction, a farewell, a vow.

Then she stepped back, her eyes never leaving his until he disappeared into the path between the petals.

His steps were slow at first. But with each stride, the burden on his back grew lighter—not because it was gone, but because it was chosen.

At the edge of the valley, he paused.

A single plum blossom petal drifted past him, as if carried by unseen wind.

He turned slightly, looking back one last time.

Zhao Yan stood with the others, her hair caught in the breeze, one hand raised in farewell.

Jian raised his own.

And then he turned fully into the morning light.

# end