





**S.W.A.**

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Typeset in Times New Roman

Converted in the United Kingdom

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*For my family and friends; without  
all of you this novel would not exist.*

Save the World Academy  
Part I:  
The SWORD of STEEL

By  
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## THE SWORD

Jade Steel lounged awkwardly on her bed. The room was naked, small and silent save for her simple clothing cupboard made of metal and a bed comprising of a single sheeted thin mattress and pillow.

The young woman didn't blink as she read Sun Wu Tzu's *The Art of War* for the twentieth time.

The girl's straight black hair was cut in line with her jaw, bobbed perfectly with an open fringe framing her smooth pale chin and deep green eyes. A year ago she had seen a picture in an encyclopaedia of the hairstyle and had always worn her hair like that since.

Today, like every day, Jade was dressed in black trousers and a black vest which showed off her toned arms and slender neck.

A deliberately timid knock sounded and Jade said nothing as the metal door opened without approval. Her eyelids came up in a glare of displeasure as she spied Julian Taigan, her master of weapons, inching through with his bald tattooed head poking around carefully.

'It is your sixteenth birthday today, Miss Steel,' Julian grinned sarcastically. He never disturbed her without a reason, 'your father has requested for you. Perhaps he has a gift.'

'What is it this time, Julian? Adders in my bed? A chandelier of knives to drop on me as I walk below them? I give you too much credit to think you know better than to bother me with my father's deadly games,' she hissed, now flicking through the pages of her book in annoyed disinterest.

Over the past year she had developed quite a short and dangerous temper. The young girl hated this day above all others and being reminded of it only made her livid.

Once, on her eleventh birthday, her father had poisoned her.

The first day she felt near death; it took her weeks to recover and father had said it was for her own good. Since then she never ate food or drank without taking precautions and checking first. She no longer supped with father and would sit in the kitchen with her trainers, people she despised save for Julian, eating the slop they made.

Father hadn't tried to fatally feed her again, however, would occasionally send a knife thrower or archer her way to keep the girl's mind and skills sharp.

Jade slept with a small dagger under her pillow, had never needed to use it, yet believed someday it would require wielding. She wondered if Julian knew of its whereabouts as he knew of all things, remembering

how he had once found her in bed when she was twelve, the sheets covered in blood.

The girl believed to have been poisoned by her father again until Julian's reassurance that it was her natural woman body. That was awkward for him, she could tell, when he handed her the small cotton pellets and advised on the girl's period cycles a few days later, telling her there may be long and short numbers of days between each menstruation.

'He has sent me to summon you, Jade,' Julian pressed more sternly. This made her lift herself from bed and open the metal locker containing only black clothing items and a shelf for her undergarments.

Jade took the long black cloak off the hangar and kicked on simple black slip-on shoes, following Julian slowly into the cold and undecorated passage way.

The fluorescent lighting gave the long metal walls a greenish tint and the iron grated flooring was smooth and silent as the pair walked.

When Jade was young she believed in trusting the company father kept, however, after many incidents the green-eyed girl knew better.

Julian Taigan was her trainer in the art of all weapons. This included kendo, swords, knives, guns, spears, crossbows, daggers, katana, whips, axes, and hammers to name but a few.

Julian was her wisest teacher. He had taught her all the languages he knew fluently; English, Mandarin, French, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, German. The patient man spoke philosophy and tactics with her and conversed as a teacher might, never overly affectionate despite the sincerity behind his grey eyes.

Julian would make her throw for the bulls-eye on a target, fencing in the dark while asking riddles, blindfold her as she put together a rifle or shot arrows underwater.

The Master of Weapons was in his late thirties when he began training her nine years ago. Jade remembered staying with him for a short time at his home when she was very little, just old enough to recall. His home had many plants and appeared like a jungle at that small age. Back then he was young and muscular, always smiling to neighbours and passers-by with his neat facial hair and colourful beanie covering his tattooed head.

Jade often thought of him as that young man with the black beard, though now it was grey and white. Those were simpler times, before she had to learn all these techniques. The girl believed him to be the deadliest of her trainers and his timid nature a ruse for what he was truly capable of.

The tattoos appeared fierce and deadly around his bald skull, sharp black lines that looked like scratches gouged into his skin. Long ago he confided of once belonging to a guild of assassins known as the Silent Panther. The ink was the claws of the Panther engraved into him in the most painful way imaginable to mark his allegiance.

He spoke of them openly these days, claiming that he was the last Panther after his guild were hunted down and killed for all their crimes.

The Sword of the Panthers, said to be the last katana of the guild in existence forged by the first Panther Assassin, steel folded over and over until it was deadly perfection, was now his by right. He was the last Panther to own it, pained to tell how he acquired the priceless weapon.

Julian claimed he would die before ever giving up the Sword of the Panthers. It was Julian's prize possession and now it served the Steel family.

Jade's father had taken him in as a personal bodyguard twenty years ago. The man still served faithfully.

Jade disliked him least, enjoying his company and teachings, but could not forgive his sitting idly by when father would wound her with cruel tasks to near death or his hired tutors would beat the girl until she was a dark purple.

Julian was always there to heal her afterwards with all his balms and needles to stitch larger gashes. He repaired her legs and arms with his potions and homemade plaster for encasing broken limbs. Once the cast came off, the girl's bones felt harder and indestructible. The Panther fixed all bruises and cuts, reassuring the pain wouldn't last and that someday her skill and strength would be unmatched.

Julian's chamber was larger than her own, more homely, with a small compact disc player on which Jade would sneak a listen to his collection of Vivaldi and Bach when he was out somewhere undertaking father's orders. She assumed he must know of his unbidden sharing, though daren't mention it.

The soundtrack of "The King and I" was her favourite of Julian's collection as it reminded the girl of another time before the bumps and damaged appendages, of her last happy day when she was six-years-old wearing a lively white dress and holding a single pale pink balloon.

It bounced under the roof of the car making her laugh. Father turned to Jade saying something pleasant. Sitting happily on the white leathered backseat, from her small height she could only see the tops of full bloomed trees flying past through the window.

Viktor, her father, was much more handsome and happier then; his jet-black hair slicked back exposing his tanned square face.

When the car stopped, father's pleasantries faded forever. Viktor pulled her from the rear seat of the car and ran, only to drop her on the doorstep of their once home. She saw the flames, crying as father barged at the door. It was her last day of happiness and first day of sadness all rolled into one memory.

Now all the girl could focus on was her training.

Her other teachers weren't so humble as Julian.

Shiba Helio claimed himself a ninja, teaching her the art of stealth, deception and fighting from the shadows. He could sneak up on any man and kill them without so much as a whisper. Shiba trained her constantly in dim rooms for six years and always wore black head to toe with a small slit for his thin eyes to peer through. Though she was a little girl she remembered her initial fear of the dark, this man appearing as if from thin air and strangling her.

The little girl didn't want to fight or defend herself in the light or in shadow, but father left her little to no choice, 'you know what *they* did, Jade. Do you want the same to happen to you? I thought so. Then you must fight, my daughter. You must fight and slit their throats the first second you get or you will die.'

She had never seen Shiba's true appearance as he never ate with the rest of the group in the kitchen, keeping to his quarters. When younger, she imagined a disfigured face of a monster beneath the cowl. It was odd that he had no scent.

Saluki Takamari was a kickboxing champion turned renegade, renowned for killing many of his foes unnecessarily after underground kickboxing championships in a dangerous region of Hong Kong. Saluki loved the art of Ong Bak and often fought with his knees.

The athletic man had long black hair and a cruel face. His eyes were like thin gashes in his uneven pockmarked face and he always wore black silk trousers and greased up his smooth naked torso, making him impossible to hold on to or follow through with a fierce stroke.

Takamari was a trickster and was often an adaptable and unpredictable fighter. In the beginning he would use the uppercut on her constantly until she learnt to block the move; thereafter he would knee her in the abdomen and kidneys till she fell to the floor unless she learnt to guard against that. It seemed, for the first three years, that every time she educated to defend a move he would invent something new and hurt her body in another place.

Vizsla Emelianenko, a Russian cage fighter who stank of onions, towered over her at a staggering seven-foot boasting he knew every move of wrestling, often bending the girl in ways so grotesque she believed her spine would snap. He was huge and ugly with whitish-

blonde hair, his head like a block and the man's muscles like bricks tied to his body with a network of thick veins.

Vizsla always wore a stained grey vest and dusty brown combat pants with big black boots. The Onion Russian went easy on her the first year, something Jade only realised when father decided to watch a bout of their tussling. She couldn't breathe for the life choking out of her. Vizsla was showing off for Viktor, a slight she would begrudge him and take her revenge on.

The greatest of these cruel fighters, if not the most ill-tempered and brutal, was Samoy Kimura, sensei of all martial arts including a broad scope of taekwondo, wushu, kung fu, ch'uan fa, and kuoshu.

The little girl had bowed to him on her first lesson and Kimura had kicked her in the face advising not to lower her eyes to enemies. Jade, for the past eight years, always had to thank him and call him "Sensei" even though she despised him and had little respect for the way he taught the arts.

The man with the pointy black beard and closely shaved hair would backhand her often. He deliberately broke her wrist and splintered her arms and legs with his blows while father sat idly by and pressed on Kimura to hit harder.

Kimura mistreated her with slaps. Jade felt he would have raped her long ago if not for the fear he had for her father.

Jade's father, the insensate Viktor Steel, ruled with an iron fist and didn't permit any of these low lives to take her virtue, the only favour he ever granted.

She never spoke casually to any of these sinister men. Everything she knew about them was through Julian. They only conversed when instructing her on moves, nothing more.

It was only last year that she had revenge. Something clicked in her mind as if all eight years of training came together congruently. The little girl awoke one day with the force and knowledge of her masters, now a young woman.

Shiba could no longer sneak up on her. When he tip-toed on his soft black slippers in the black of the room she could hear him bounding behind her like an elephant. He was easy to beat these days. She had come to realise that this bogeyman in the dark was no more than an average fighter hiding behind the cover of shadow and smoke.

The last time he had tried to strangle her, Jade broke eight of his fingers.

Saluki's unpredictability had become predictable. He had used up all his moves and she forced him into a corner, seeing the desperation in his eyes. The young woman had used powdered fists and her knuckles

gripped easily on his oily chest, fracturing ribs. He couldn't adapt to her anymore, she knew more than he did. The trickster had nothing left in his repertoire of fighting wiles. A thirty-five-year-old kick boxer was being beaten by a fifteen-year-old girl and there was nothing he could do about it.

Jade remembered the adulation within herself as he swivelled on his knees before her. The girl uppercut him so hard she heard teeth shatter in his mouth. After years of fighting him the vengeance was worth the wait.

Julian had taught her every pressure point in the body and with this knowledge she had bought Vizsla, the Onion Juggernaut, to his knees with three simple strokes. For his size he was always slower than her, as they both knew. Ultimately, it was his downfall. He woke up a day later in the medical ward, his eyes black and his voice not fully returned from the bruising about his neck.

Julian had told her that once the man found his speech Vizsla mentioned of no recollection the bout ever took place. Whether the Russian spoke truthfully or if he was ashamed of his defeat Jade would never know.

Kimura was her favourite victory. He lost his temper and attempted to harm her to quench his frustration, his hard fist lashing out in desperation. Jade caught it to his surprise.

She educated herself to that look quickly; the look of an opponent's dread. She had never seen it before in these grown men and now there it was; that same look of fear that they only displayed in her father's presence.

Kimura's eyes were always solid and evil for eight years, and then she turned her leg in a floor sweep, cracking her right heel solidly over his gullet. He lay there for a long moment in pain. She stood quickly, digging her foot against the bones of his throat. Kimura was helpless and his eyes pleading. *This man is afraid to die.*

Jade never called him Sensei again after that day and he never attempted a cheap swipe or commanded her respect.

It was like this whenever she faced any of them. She wasn't their pupil, she was their superior and they all knew it, the trepidation gleaming in their eyes. They were sparring for her approval. Julian had not needed to bandage her broken body or wounds in over a year.

Julian was the only one who would not battle her. She hated him for it.

*What are you made of, old man?* She ached to fight him with any weapon of his choosing. Her favourite was the sword, even though she

only trained with light lead in her younger years until she was old and strong enough to raise a long heavy blade.

‘Here we are,’ Julian pointed to the door in obviousness.

Jade had walked to her father’s quarter’s dozens of times. They were more lavish than hers, grander, more extravagant with dark silk drapery, paintings of old ships hung mysteriously on the walls and a long row of shelves with books and books on factual things. She pondered on having to return the literature she was reading now at some time.

This was the only room in this iron box that had carpeting, something she believed father installed to remind him somewhat of his humanity. The carpet was a light grey and of medium softness. Father’s work desk was made of aluminium, barren with only a simple fifteen-inch laptop plugged into the nearest electrical socket. His chair was sturdy and hugged with black leather, the back of the chair reaching higher than necessary towards the metal ceiling. The light in the room was controlled by a dimmer switch and father always liked it on a medium setting, making the room appear candlelit.

‘Daughter,’ Viktor boomed as the metallic door swung open.

Jade and Julian entered slowly, not bothering to glance about. Julian remained standing up straight in the doorway.

‘Julian, leave us,’ Viktor dismissed him coldly and the bald man bowed without looking away, ever obedient, the metal door sealing as he still faced his lord.

Jade remained silently waiting for father’s words. She had surmised a long time ago that it was better to be seen and not heard, never talking unless addressed by him.

‘Julian tells me you are ready,’ Viktor confessed. He was walking about the room showing her his right side. It always comforted her to see this side of him, yet she would never illustrate or express it. ‘Julian tells me that his work here is done. There is nothing more he can show or teach you. Nothing more he can do for me. He says that you are ready to take over his duties and that you will do better than he ever could,’ Viktor’s voice was hollow and overpowering at the same time, muting every other sound in the room. One could hear a pin drop when he spoke.

Jade didn’t move. Father was the only real family she had left. She respected him regardless of his cruel ways, believing he loved her and all the years of torment were preparation for something far grander.

‘We will change the world together,’ he promised often.

Jade yearned for his approval. She would kill for this man.

‘He wishes to be relieved, to retire to the normal world. He desires to live out the rest of his days on some modest island, sitting under palm trees, eating fish he catches in the ocean, sipping coconuts that he chops open with his bare mercenary hands. Twenty years I thought I knew this man, still he surprises me. My noble intentions for this planet have clearly left a sour taste in his mouth. The once Silent Panther tells me you are capable. I have never doubted Julian... until now. He tells me that it is your sixteenth birthday today. I had not bothered to count.’

Jade did not flinch, she had grown accustomed to father’s demeaning quips, smiling inside that she had beaten majority of his finest warriors he surrounded himself with.

‘Will you not speak, daughter?’

Jade had been addressed by her father, now she must answer, ‘Julian said you summoned me.’

Viktor finally turned to her fully and stared for a moment, not entirely pleased with her abruptness, ‘bring me Julian’s sword. Bring me the Sword of the Panthers. Lay it before me.’

Jade hid her shock well. *Steel by name and nature.*

Father wanted her to kill Julian Taigan. This was the release that Viktor wanted to repay the old master of weapons with.

Julian, her closest mentor and only friend in this steel prison. Julian, who Viktor had known for longer than Jade had been on this earth. Julian, who Viktor had left his only daughter in the care of for many years. Julian, who had saved Viktor’s life when father was in a most tragic accident. She often wondered how different her life would have been if Julian had left him to die that day.

*Would I have survived as long?*

‘So be it, father,’ Jade bowed, turning her back to leave the chilled chamber, her black cloak whipping behind. It was another of his cruel tests. *Kill your only friend or live forever in this cold prison I have locked you in for over a decade.*

It took three hours before Jade Steel returned to her father’s chambers unbidden. Her black hood was over her head like a monk of death.

Hanging limply in her right hand was a long blade, unsheathed, sharp and curving, glinting in the minimal light with worn intricate engravings of bloodthirsty carnivores on the haft.

Jade ventured close to her father, ignoring the fact that he had not moved much from her last visit; in fact it felt as if he was standing in the exact same position as before, knowing she would come to him before the day was through.

‘Father,’ the Sword of the Panthers was wet and dripping with fresh blood.

The girl knelt briefly to place it before him on the carpet, not caring as the red dripped like venom off the tang, staining the cobalt coloured material. She stood and took two steps back.

‘What is my next task?’ asked Jade.