

THE WAY OF RESTRAINT

Chapter 51: The Bearing of a Grandmaster

Su Shilin fell silent.

He had originally intended to give his son a beating as a lesson, but after witnessing that punch, he was deeply shaken.

Standing before him, Su Jie was composed and steady, exuding the weight of a mountain. There was none of the recklessness or impatience typical of an ordinary teenager.

"What is the intent behind your punch?" Su Shilin suddenly asked. "Everything has a core philosophy; otherwise, it is like water without a source. The form of your punch is flawless, but I cannot grasp the essence within it. The spirit of a punch lies in one's thoughts. What were you thinking when you executed it?"

"The Prime Minister once said at the age of twelve, 'I study for the rise of China.'" Su Jie replied earnestly. "When I threw that punch, I had only two phrases in my heart—'The land resides in my heart, and with the crow of the rooster, the world awakens to light.' I carry the land within me, wishing for my motherland to rise with the morning sun and illuminate the world."

"A punch must have spirit, and momentum determines its magnitude." Su Shilin gazed at his son. "Your punch indeed carried that essence. The form of martial arts is fixed, but its spirit is ever-changing, shaped by one's character. Those with ruthless determination suit a spirit of defiance against the heavens and the earth, while those with a peaceful nature align with a spirit of cultivation and harvest. A person's martial arts should reflect their inner self, and you have found the spirit most suited to you. I truly underestimated you."

"Does that mean you agree to let me take a break from school?" Su Jie asked, overjoyed.

"No."

Su Shilin's response left Su Jie dumbfounded. "Why not?"

"It's for your own good." Su Shilin sat down by the flowerbed and lit a cigarette. "I don't know what you've experienced at the martial arts academy, but while you have honed your skills, that life has also altered your mindset. You now believe that attending school is a waste of time. But in my view, you have become restless and need to return to a state of calm. Only then can you truly settle your outlook on life and temper your worldly distractions."

Hearing his father's words, Su Jie fell into silence.

"Son, do you know what a dragon is?" Su Shilin suddenly asked.

"A dragon?" Su Jie was puzzled by his father's question.

"In the Book of Changes, the Qian hexagram speaks of the dragon—'Do not act as a hidden dragon, a dragon seen in the fields, a flying dragon in the heavens, an arrogant dragon that will have regrets, and a group of dragons without a leader.' These phrases actually describe people. People are dragons, and dragons are people." Su Shilin continued, "Cao Cao's discussion of the dragon in Romance of the Three Kingdoms is particularly insightful—'The dragon can be great or small, can ascend or conceal itself. When great, it swallows clouds and exhales mist; when small, it hides in crevices. When it ascends, it soars through the universe; when it hides, it lurks beneath the waves. A dragon can fly in the sky, but it can also dwell in the burrows of insects.' No matter the environment, it remains unfazed."

Since hearing Odell's words, Su Jie had started reading the Book of Changes in his spare time. However, he only had a superficial understanding of it. Given his current life experience, he still could not fully grasp the wisdom within its pages.

Yet, after hearing his father's words, he gained some insight into the first hexagram—'A dragon seen in the fields, a flying dragon in the heavens. An arrogant dragon that will have regrets.'

"Alright, Dad, I'll continue with my studies at school." Su Jie understood the reasoning—his father wanted him to maintain his mindset even in an ordinary environment.

"‘A dragon seen in the fields benefits from meeting a great person.’ So that’s what it means... The dragon remains hidden in the fields, which benefits its growth into greatness. ‘Meeting’ here doesn’t mean encountering someone, but rather gaining experience. ‘A great person’ is a state of being." Su Jie shared his interpretation.

"You actually understand the Book of Changes?" Su Shilin looked at his son with newfound respect. "I’d really like to meet your martial arts teacher. How did he manage to bring you to this level in just two months? Could he be some kind of deity?"

"He told me not to say anything," Su Jie replied. "But you’ll find out sooner or later, Dad."

"Alright, go upstairs." Su Shilin finished his cigarette.

"By the way, Dad, what kind of martial arts do you practice?" Su Jie had always been curious. In the past, he hadn’t understood martial arts, but now that he had stepped into this world, his curiosity about his father’s skills had only grown.

"Let’s eat first." Su Shilin seemed reluctant to discuss martial arts. "Stay in school for one more semester. After that, I won’t interfere—you can decide how to live your life."

The father and son returned home in harmony. When Xu Ying heard that Su Jie had re-enrolled in school, she was slightly surprised but said nothing.

After preparing a lavish dinner, the family enjoyed a warm and cheerful meal, though Su Jie's older sister, Su Muchen, did not return home.

After dinner, Su Jie went downstairs for some exercise, reviewing and refining what Odell and Gu Yang had taught him.

Meanwhile, on the balcony, Su Shilin watched his son practicing below. He lit another cigarette, his eyes gleaming as he sank into deep contemplation.

After training, Su Jie took a shower, read for a while, and went to bed at exactly nine o'clock. At three in the morning, he got up, washed up, and jogged to the park to begin his morning practice.

No matter where he was, he maintained this habit, never letting his surroundings influence his discipline.

His conversation with his father had completely settled his mind. He no longer rejoiced in gains or lamented losses. He could live in luxury or endure hardship, thrive in comfort, or survive in adversity.

Indeed, the training environment at Minglun Martial Arts Academy was far superior to that at home or in high school. However, if he became unaccustomed

to his home and school environment because of it, it would not be beneficial for tempering his mindset.

He had completely come to terms with this.

After training until six in the morning, he returned home, intending to buy some breakfast. However, he discovered that his father, Su Shilin, had already prepared a meal—fragrant porridge, eggs, milk, fruits, vegetables, boiled fish, as well as honey and a purple capsule. (G: 紫色的胶囊 – purple capsule – Medicine)

"This capsule—is it propolis?" Su Jie asked his father. "Dad, why is breakfast so lavish today?" (G: Propolis, also known as "bee glue," is a resinous substance collected by honeybees from plant buds and exudates.)

"It's propolis. It's great for health, and it supplements the nutrition you need for training. This meal plan is based on one of the breakfast categories of boxing champion Paschi," Su Shilin explained. "Eat up, then head to school. You're registering today."

"Alright." Su Jie sat down and ate slowly, maintaining his usual habit of eating in silence, an unshakable routine. After finishing his meal, he swallowed his saliva, massaged his stomach, stood up to move around, and only after completely dispelling the feeling of fullness did he speak.

This entire series of actions once again left Su Shilin astonished. He had been observing his son for quite some time and realized that he was completely different from two months ago. Beyond his martial arts progress, his attitude toward all aspects of life now exhibited the temperament of a true master.

After finishing breakfast, Su Jie helped clean up the dishes before heading to school with his backpack, squeezing into the subway.

Today marked the start of the school term, and the campus was bustling with people in the early morning. The most solemn expressions were on the faces of students entering their final year. Everyone knew that the last year of high school was crucial—it was all about the college entrance exams. From now on, it would be a relentless cycle of daily quizzes and major exams every three days, with the pressure of academics weighing down like a collapsing mountain.

Su Jie's high school was the top-ranked school in the city and one of the top three in the country—he had earned his place there purely through merit.

Every student at this school was a top scorer from their respective regions, each possessing their own unique strengths. Su Jie consistently placed second or third in exams, making him one of the elite among the elite.

However, he had never managed to take first place.

The school's top student—and the number one student in the entire province—was Qian Zheng. No matter the subject, he always held an unshakable lead over Su Jie, particularly in physical education.

Moreover, Qian Zheng was tall and handsome. While Su Jie stood at only 1.75 meters, Qian Zheng had already reached 1.85 meters, boasting a perfectly sculpted, streamlined physique. Dressed in casual clothes, he looked like a celebrity, exuding an extraordinary aura. Among the female students, he was unanimously recognized as the most handsome guy in school.

To top it off, Qian Zheng's family owned the "Starshine Combat Fitness Club," a franchise with branches all over the country. The business was booming, the brand was worth a fortune, and he was the textbook definition of a rich and handsome elite.

With top-tier grades, an outstanding physique, a striking appearance, and a wealthy background, he had all the glory in the world. No matter how hard Su Jie worked, he simply couldn't catch up.

One of the main reasons Su Jie enrolled at Minglun Martial Arts Academy was because of his older sister, Su Muchen, and the situation with Haoyu Group. Another significant reason was his rivalry with Qian Zheng.

Su Jie desperately wanted to take first place, but each time, Qian Zheng crushed him without fail. This frustration gnawed at him—especially because a certain girl was caught in the middle of it all.

Now, as he stepped onto the school grounds, he found his past competitiveness laughable—just the folly of youth. Looking back, it was nothing more than a fleeting memory.

Even though only two months had passed at Minglun Martial Arts Academy—just a single summer break—Su Jie's mentality seemed to have matured by twenty years.

Stepping into the campus, he saw his classmates again after the summer break—both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

"Whoa! Su Jie? Is that really you? How did you get so tall? Did you take something?"

Several students ran up to him, exclaiming in surprise.

At school, Su Jie had the nickname "Second Brother Su" because he was always second place in exams, whether in school or across the district. The unflattering nickname had stuck.

"Qi Shuai, Zhang Minghui, Zou Min, Gu Shunan—you guys have grown taller too," Su Jie said, smiling at the four classmates he often hung out with.

"Looks like you're almost as tall as Qian Zheng now," Qi Shuai teased, winking. "Maybe now you can compete with him for our school's beauty queen! We're taking the entrance exam today, and I heard the school has introduced an AI grading system. Scores will be released on the same day. If you manage to take first place, what was it again that the school beauty would do? Oh, and your last love letter was a literary masterpiece—what did you prepare for her this time? Mind letting us take a peek?"

"Yeah, show us, show us!"

His friends egged him on again.

"That was just youthful foolishness," Su Jie replied calmly. "Dating and chasing girls can wait until after university."

Chapter 52: Morning Blooms, Evening Memories

The renowned "Campus Belle Ning" was named Ning Zixi. She was also a top student, and on top of that, she was stunningly beautiful.

She, Su Jie, and Qian Zheng consistently secured the top three spots in the school.

Qian Zheng was always ranked first.

Su Jie and Ning Zixi alternated between second and third place, though most of the time, Su Jie was second while she was third.

At school, the three of them were well-known figures. In terms of looks, Qian Zheng and Ning Zixi were considered the perfect golden couple. After all, Su Jie was rather plain, with no particular advantage in height, appearance, or family background.

Once, in a moment of reckless impulse, Su Jie wrote Ning Zixi a love letter. She did not respond but instead had someone return the letter to his desk. Somehow, the letter got leaked, causing a huge uproar in both their class and the entire school. For a long time, Su Jie couldn't even lift his head in embarrassment.

Every time his close friends brought up the incident, he would be mortified.

But now, when someone mentioned it again, he felt nothing. Instead, he smiled, finding his past foolishness amusing. Looking back, he realized that everyone experiences impulsive moments in their youth.

Reflecting on it now, Su Jie neither regretted his past recklessness nor felt the need to restore his reputation.

His current mindset was like that of an adult reminiscing about the naive mistakes of youth—filled with nostalgia for lost innocence, savoring the bittersweet memories.

[Morning Blooms, Evening Memories.]

That was exactly how he felt.

'How did my mindset mature so much? It's only been one summer break.' Su Jie was slightly surprised at his own change in perspective.

Seeing that Su Jie showed no signs of embarrassment, his friends quickly lost interest in the topic.

"Ning Zixi and Qian Zheng are here," Qi Shuai pointed into the distance.

Sure enough, the golden couple walked side by side. The boy was tall and handsome, while the girl was elegant, graceful, and radiant—yet exuding an aura that made her seem untouchable.

No one knew what they were discussing, but their presence alone drew countless gazes from the students around them.

"That's Ning Zixi and Qian Zheng, our senior classmates in the third year. They're the president and vice president of the student council."

"They really look amazing together."

The first-year students, in particular, were buzzing with chatter.

"Su Jie, you've grown quite a bit over the summer," Qian Zheng remarked casually as he approached.

Ning Zixi also smiled and nodded. "You're the student council's vice president now. After the entrance exam, we have a task for the student council. Stay behind to help us complete it."

"What task?" Su Jie asked.

"Haoyu Group has installed an AI learning system in our school. The school's database is now linked with Haoyu Group and connected to numerous global servers. We can access advanced academic knowledge that isn't available on the regular internet," Ning Zixi explained. "The three of us will be the first to test it and submit a report to the academic director and principal. Later, we'll be responsible for guiding the other student council members before rolling it out to the whole school."

"That sounds good." The mention of Haoyu Group made Su Jie take notice. If even their school was receiving an AI learning system and sharing data, the company was clearly executing a grand strategy.

Su Jie's high school was one of the nation's top institutions, affiliated with a prestigious university. Outstanding students had opportunities to participate in university-level scientific research and experience college life in advance. The school also had numerous direct admission slots, making it the dream destination for middle school graduates across the city.

"We should go register now. The entrance exam is about to begin," Qian Zheng said, glancing at Su Jie. "This exam is a comprehensive assessment. It's significantly harder than even the national college entrance exam. The AI system generates questions in real-time from an extensive database, and the school administration has set the difficulty level 50% higher than usual."

"This exam is city-wide, with multiple schools participating. The results will be compiled and ranked together. The school leadership is taking it very seriously. We three must maintain our positions in the city's top three rankings—we can't afford to fall behind," Ning Zixi said confidently, making it clear that she had done extensive preparation over the summer.

"And that's not all," Qian Zheng added. "Haoyu Group has implemented its AI learning system in many high schools, handling everything from question generation to grading. To promote the system, the company has set up a scholarship for the top-scoring student in the city—the prize is a staggering 200,000 yuan."

"What? That much?" Su Jie was shocked. "Even the champion of the Silk Road Cup essay competition only got 100,000 yuan."

At the Minglun Martial Arts Academy tournament, the champion's prize was 500,000 yuan. Su Jie had been determined to win, but unfortunately, he was eliminated in the first round after facing Feng Hengyi and losing in just two punches.

But for a high school entrance exam to offer a 200,000-yuan scholarship? That was astronomical—completely unheard of. Then again, Haoyu Group had deep pockets, and launching a high-profile campaign wasn't surprising.

"It's definitely a huge amount," Ning Zixi nodded. "Haoyu Group probably wants to use this to market their software to schools nationwide. The highest prize before this was from the Xixin Group's National Poetry Contest, where the grand champion received 300,000 yuan. Unfortunately, Qian Zheng and I both failed to win first place—B City's Zhang Jinchuan took the title instead."

"Zhang Jinchuan is indeed formidable," Qian Zheng said. "I consider him my greatest rival. I aim to be the national top scorer in the college entrance exams, and he is the biggest obstacle in my way."

It was clear that Qian Zheng had already set his sights on winning the 200,000-yuan prize.

“Haoyu Group offering such a large bonus is actually a test. Two hundred thousand may be a lot for an individual, but for Haoyu Group it’s just a drop in the bucket—and it also earned them a good reputation for supporting education. Moreover, connecting with the school’s data brings many benefits to the group. Young people are the future; their various habits, when analyzed through big data, have significant reference value for the future of commerce. Of course, that’s just one aspect of the plan—there’s also a deeper meaning behind it.

Deep inside, Su Jie’s perspective had already shifted. He pondered carefully, *‘Since Minglun Martial Arts Academy didn’t receive that championship bonus, maybe this time I can give it a try by challenging Qian Zheng.’*

Seeing Su Jie silent and lost in thought, Ning Zixi spoke up, "Su Jie, you need to work hard too!"

"Let’s go," Qian Zheng said with a wave of his hand. "Zixi, you still need to improve your fitness. Has your training this summer really transformed your physique? Our Starshine Combat Fitness Club’s karate coach is pretty good. Let’s practice together after school."

"It’s really good, though I still can’t master the high-difficulty aerial kick," Ning Zixi admitted. Su Jie, would you like to join our combat training as well? I’ve been learning karate at Starshine Combat Fitness Club all summer."

Hearing Ning Zixi’s invitation, Qian Zheng’s eyes flashed with a hint of displeasure.

"Forget it, forget it," Su Jie remarked, clearly noticing Qian Zheng's discontent. "If I'm going to train, I'd rather choose Chinese martial arts."

"Chinese martial arts is all show—it won't win in the ring. Even if that might not seem patriotic, the fact remains: in competitions, you hardly see any true martial arts," Qian Zheng said with obvious disdain. "Zixi, that so-called martial arts master who came to our Starshine Combat Fitness Club this summer claimed it was for an exchange, but he actually came to challenge the club—and within three seconds, he was knocked down. You saw it with your own eyes."

"I did see it with my own eyes. Chinese martial arts might look impressive in movies and novels, but in reality, it's just average. We need to face the facts," Ning Zixi waved his hand dismissively.

"Alright, now that you put it that way, I really do want to check out your combat club and learn a thing or two," Su Jie admitted. Originally, he hadn't been very interested, but after hearing Qian Zheng and Ning Zixi's attitudes toward Chinese martial arts, he felt compelled to change his mind.

During the two months he spent training in martial arts at Minglun Martial Arts Academy that summer, Su Jie experienced many revelations. The passion for Chinese martial arts among Chinese people wasn't very high, yet countless foreigners were eager to learn it one after another. Their perseverance, their dedication to martial arts—it was all truly impressive.

In a few years, or maybe even ten, will Chinese people have to go abroad to learn Chinese martial arts from foreigners? In fact, that's already the case. Su Jie's journey with martial arts began with the foreigner Odell.

"That sounds great—I'll contact you after school," Ning Zixi said happily. "The three of us training together will be much more lively."

Qian Zheng forced a smile, adding, "Su Jie, if you join, I'll get you an 80% membership discount."

'That sounds awesome,' Su Jie thought, having sensed all of Qian Zheng's little schemes.

"Let's go get ready for registration and the exam," Ning Zixi suggested.

The three of them walked into the classroom. In the large lecture hall, simply scanning your face in front of the video screen was equivalent to completing the registration process, after which they took their seats.

The homeroom teacher entered, clutching a thick stack of test papers. "Class, today is both registration and the entrance exam. Now that you've entered your senior year of high school, I won't say much except prepare yourselves for a year of relentless exams. This year is all about exam after exam," she explained.

The teacher, Ms. Chen Juan, was highly qualified with top-notch teaching skills, fair in her judgments yet strict. Of course, even the strictest teacher is gentle with her top students.

Su Jie thought very highly of her—after the previous love letter incident, she even took the time to speak with him sincerely without losing her temper.

"Today's exam will last one day," Ms. Chen Juan announced. "Normally, the college entrance exam spans two days, but this time you only have one. If you can adapt to this intensity, then you'll be as free as a fish in water during the actual college entrance exam. You've all seen the information on the school website, right? This entrance exam is sponsored by Haoyu Group, and all high schools in the city will have unified test papers. If someone manages to clinch first place in the city with a total score above 700 points, Haoyu Group will award that student a scholarship of 200,000. However, the overall difficulty of this exam paper is 50% higher than even the hardest college entrance exam paper from previous years. I won't say more—I expect our class to produce the top scorer in the entire city. Qian Zheng, do you have the confidence?"

"Of course," Qian Zheng responded as he stood up, clearly standing out among his classmates, before sitting down again with an air of dominance. He had always been the top student; in the two years of high school, no one had ever taken his top spot.

"Hand out the test papers," Ms. Chen Juan instructed the students at the front to distribute them to everyone, and the exam began.

All the students were well-practiced; as soon as they received the test papers, they plunged into answering the questions with intense concentration.

‘These questions are really difficult,’ Su Jie thought. After scanning through the test paper in ten seconds, various knowledge points began to ferment in his mind, and within twenty seconds he had gauged the overall difficulty of the exam. Yet, these questions posed no problem for him.

During those two months of martial arts training in the summer, aside from English, he hadn’t reviewed much. After returning, he only studied for a few hours, so logically his grades should have slipped. But now, his mind was clearer than ever, and he understood various concepts more profoundly—as if he had suddenly come to a revelation.

Swish, swish, swish!

The fountain pen flowed across the test paper, writing out graceful Chinese characters and symbols.

Chapter 53: Entrance Exam All-Around First

This exam was extremely challenging, and time was very tight.

During the Chinese language test in the first session, many students in the class hadn't finished their papers when it was time to collect them.

It's important to note that the school Su Jie attended was a national key school; even the weakest student could easily get into a top university. Yet now, faced with the test paper, everyone was at a complete loss.

Even Qian Zheng's expression was grave.

"How can this exam be just 50% more difficult? It's more than double the usual difficulty. What exactly is Haoyu Group trying to do?" After one session of the exam, Ning Zixi couldn't help but complain.

The entire class was very dejected.

But before they could adjust their mindset, the second exam began.

They had to finish four sessions in one day, which was a huge drain on both their physical stamina and mental energy.

The second session was mathematics, and the questions were even tougher; most students couldn't complete even half of the problems.

After the two morning sessions, many students were completely exhausted. They barely managed to eat lunch and rest for a while before beginning the foreign language test, followed by either the comprehensive liberal arts or science test.

Su Jie's class was the science track, so the test papers were even harder. After the comprehensive science exam, the entire class felt as if they were soldiers defeated in battle.

"Finally, the test is over." The moment Su Jie handed in his paper, he felt even more exhausted than if he had been competing all day. His brain felt completely drained, and even his physical strength nearly gave out—a testament to how difficult this exam was.

Qian Zheng looked pale as well.

Of course, there were also students who had given up early. Seeing that the questions had exceeded their limits, they simply stopped trying, which made things much easier for them.

But Qian Zheng was determined to preserve his honor, so he racked his brain to solve every problem, naturally leaving him utterly exhausted.

After everyone had submitted their papers, the homeroom teacher, Chen Juan, entered with a smile. "The test results will be completely graded in one hour. This

time, the papers were scanned by artificial intelligence and then entered into the system for scoring. There won't be any errors, and the rankings will be published on the computer. Please wait here."

In the past, if it had been a city-wide exam, the teachers would have had to organize a huge grading team, and it would have taken at least three or four days to release the scores.

Now, however, the papers are simply fed into a scanner, each image entered into the system, and the exam results are produced—the efficiency has increased by over a hundredfold.

'Maybe in the future, homework grading can be done this way too, saving the teachers so much time,' Su Jie thought.

All the students sat in the classroom, waiting with teacher Chen Juan for the exam results.

At the front of the classroom, there was a large computer projection screen that would immediately publish the city-wide exam rankings. It seemed that this test was the result of long negotiations between Haoyu Group and various high schools' education departments—a very tightly scheduled exam where everything was about efficiency.

Time ticked by second by second.

Suddenly, a countdown appeared on the big screen.

Ten, nine...

Everyone grew tense, as if they were truly facing the moment when their college entrance exam scores would be announced.

Teacher Chen Juan nodded repeatedly as she observed, "This kind of atmosphere lets everyone experience the intensity of the college entrance exam in advance. If we have more sessions like this, all the students will become accustomed to the pace of the college entrance exam, and that will help avoid situations where too much pressure causes poor performance."

Having been a homeroom teacher for many years, she had seen too many cases where students, who usually performed excellently, underperformed in the college entrance exam because of psychological factors, which she found very regrettable.

"The exam scores are out. Who is the city's number one?"

"Two hundred thousand. That's a prize of two hundred thousand! I still can't believe that Haoyu Group is offering such a huge reward."

"This exam left me completely exhausted. I never want to take another exam in my life. I think whoever scores above 700 on this test should get the two hundred thousand."

"Yeah, the questions were too difficult. Normally I could score 600, but this time I doubt I'd even reach 500."

"It must be Qian Zheng, after all he always scores first."

"I think so too."

"But I wonder if he can manage to score 700. Even if he comes in first, without a score of 700 he won't get the bonus."

"Look, look—the results are out."

Everyone held their breath.

Then they all watched as festive red characters jumped onto the screen.

First place, Su Jie, total score 723.

Second place, Qian Zheng, total score 700.

Third place, Ning Zixi, total score 690.

Then the list continued, scrolling until the top one hundred names had been published.

For a full minute, the room was silent before it finally erupted.

Everyone was staring at Su Jie—it was simply unbelievable. Even Qian Zheng only scored 700, yet Su Jie managed to pull off an astronomical score of 723.

In previous exams, Qian Zheng's scores usually ranged between 710 and 730. Given the extreme difficulty of this exam, Qian Zheng scoring 700 was still nothing short of miraculous.

When everyone first saw the exam questions, they all believed that it was impossible for anyone to score above 700 on this paper.

"Good grief, is this even humanly possible?"

"How did Su Jie improve so much over one summer? Did he take some kind of divine medicine? Or was he secretly taught some techniques?"

"Have you read too many novels? Did Su Jie get the exam paper in advance?"

"No, it can't be. I heard this exam paper was generated automatically by the system within an hour before the test, and then printed. The Haoyu Group developed this system precisely to prevent anyone from leaking the exam paper beforehand, ensuring complete fairness."

"Does that mean this is his true ability? That's just terrifying. This time, the title of 'Number One' finally slipped from Qian Zheng's grasp."

"Maybe after the love letter incident, Su Jie reflected deeply and spent the whole summer determined to study. But Qian Zheng wasn't idle either—he seemed to be diligently studying and exercising."

"He even broke the 700-point mark. Honestly, if it weren't for Su Jie, he would have been first this time, and he'd have easily secured the 200,000. It's a pity something unexpected happened."

Class teacher Chen Juan was also shocked. She had been astonished that Qian Zheng could score 700, and she never imagined that Su Jie could score 723. Her first thought was that the exam paper must have been leaked.

But thinking about it, that was impossible—the exam paper was generated only an hour before the test, so even if someone got hold of it an hour in advance, it would still be too late.

“It can’t be!” Qian Zheng suddenly stood up in a burst of shock when he saw Su Jie’s score, clearly losing his composure.

He knew very well how difficult the exam was. He had pushed himself to his limits just to barely hit 700 points, and he thought he would be able to outshine everyone. He hadn’t expected Su Jie to surpass him by so many points.

In the past, the difference between his and Su Jie’s scores was always 20–30 points, and Su Jie never stood a chance of catching up. Now, he had been overtaken by a wide margin, and his first reaction was disbelief.

After a long while, he finally sat down, still trying to maintain his composure. Then he walked over to Su Jie and said, “Congratulations, you finally got first place this time. Could you share some study tips? But mark my words—for the next exam, I’m going to take it back.”

“Let’s study together and improve together,” Su Jie replied calmly. He wasn’t really shocked; he thought it was only natural, and there wasn’t even a ripple of disturbance in his heart.

He had now seen another side of the world of martial arts, broadening his horizons significantly.

“Su Jie, remarkable,” Ning Zixi said with a curious gleam in her eye.

Clap, clap, clap...

“Everyone, please return to your seats and be quiet.”

Class teacher Chen Juan clapped her hands, and the classroom immediately quieted down. A barely contained look of joy appeared on her face as she said, “You all performed exceptionally well this time—our class has all three of the top spots in the city. Of course, don’t get too cocky; keep striving for even better results. Su Jie, come up here. The principal will present you with an award shortly, and your bonus will be deposited directly into your account.”

Sure enough, it wasn’t long before all the school leaders arrived.

Su Jie stood on the podium, practically basking in the spotlight. Of course, he was one of the top three students, and the school leaders had already marked him as a key student to watch and nurture.

“This time, Su Jie truly achieved both fame and fortune, stealing all the limelight. The Second Brother Su finally turned the tables.”

“Yeah, Qian Zheng may seem calm on the outside, but I’m sure he’s feeling pretty upset. Just wait and see how he plans to take it back in the next exam.”

“Even if he does manage to retake it, there won’t be such a huge bonus again.”

“This was a publicity stunt by the Haoyu Group to promote their artificial intelligence, with no expense spared. There definitely won’t be such an opportunity next time—the 200,000 scholarship is enough to buy two or three square meters of a house.”

“In our area, luxury homes go for over 200,000 per square meter.”

“Later, Su Jie should treat everyone.”

Su Jie showed no hint of restraint while standing on the podium.

“Su Jie, would you like to share your thoughts? Also, now that you’ve received this enormous scholarship, how do you plan to use it?” The principal, a middle-aged man named Zhao Ming, spoke. He didn’t have any bureaucratic airs; instead, he exuded a strong academic vibe.

“I’d prefer if this money isn’t deposited into my account. If possible, please donate it directly, in our class’s name, to the students in the mountainous regions who are struggling to continue their education,” Su Jie said after a moment of thought.

“Wait, listen everyone—Su Jie said he wants to donate the entire bonus to the underprivileged students in the mountainous areas.”

“200,000, just donated like that? And it’s in his name or the class’s name?”

This comment immediately caused another uproar.

“Su Jie, are you really going to donate all this money in our class’s name?” Class teacher Chen Juan was momentarily stunned when she heard Su Jie’s words.

“Yes, donate it all in our class’s name,” Su Jie said decisively with a nod.

He had just reflected on the fact that he was in dire need of money—especially after learning from his martial arts training that physical fitness is built on financial means. That 200,000 could have enabled him to do a lot, but in the end, he decided to donate it.

Once he had made up his mind and spoken it aloud, he felt an immense sense of relief.

Money was important to him, but having seen the left-behind elderly and children in the countryside, he realized that although his family wasn't as well off as those rich kids, he was fortunate enough to enjoy a better education in the city compared to those rural children.

If he could do something with what he had, he'd do it. As the saying goes, "all the money in the world will come back to you if you have the ability."

During study sessions, in the second class taught by Gu Yang, they were taught to deliver rice, grain, and oil to rural areas to comfort the left-behind elderly and children—a lesson that had deeply moved him.

Donating the money would be a way to see if he was truly willing to let it go, and to measure the gains and losses as his attitude shifted. Money was important, but would it ever truly affect his inner self?

Chapter 54: Choosing and Tempering the Heart

Cultivation requires a lot of money. There's a saying that one may be poor in scholarship but rich in martial prowess. However, as Su Jie studied the Book of Changes, he gradually understood some important principles.

Although money is indispensable, one should not become its slave; rather, one must master it completely—choosing and discarding at will, handling it as casually as one might pluck a flower, letting it drift away like passing clouds.

After making his decision, Su Jie felt as though a dark haze in his heart had completely vanished, replaced by fearlessness and brilliant clarity. Heroes and brave men do not fear death, but what do they fear? They fear having no money. As the saying goes, even a penny can trip up the bravest man. Even the most principled individuals cannot help but bend for a small payment; that is life. Once a person is no longer shackled by money, his heart becomes flawless.

Although Su Jie might never completely free himself from such constraints, he had now embraced this subconscious understanding. His spirit—his mental resilience—was gradually becoming stronger. Initially, under Odell's training, he was able to persist and endure pain. Later, under Uncle Mang's massage, his endurance deepened even further; eventually, when Uncle Mang locked him in a dark room for several days and nights, Su Jie managed to free himself from despair. Afterward, he rediscovered the “soul” of his martial arts, and his mental strength greatly improved.

Then, through conversations with his father, Su Shilin, he gained the insight to remain calm and composed in any situation. Today, he further refined and elevated himself, reaching a state where money in his heart could be acquired or discarded at will. Step by step, he honed his spirit, making it more unbreakable and fully under his control. In doing so, his boxing techniques became purer, and his martial arts skills broke through once again.

When everyone saw Su Jie donate a full 200,000 in scholarship money without batting an eye, Qian Zheng's face turned extremely solemn, while Ning Zixi was utterly puzzled about what exactly had happened to Su Jie this summer—she was very curious.

“Tonight's evening self-study session is cancelled; now everyone can return to their dorms or go home to rest. Classes will resume as usual tomorrow.” After the exam results were released, Su Jie received his award and made the donation, leaving him with nothing further to do. Homeroom teacher Chen Juan clapped her hands, signaling the students to rest.

“Su Jie, the student council has something to attend to; we need to go to the computer lab to try out the school's new learning system,” called out Ning Zixi.

“Alright,” Su Jie replied with a smile.

At that moment, Qian Zheng had completely bounced back—as if his second-place exam result had nothing to do with him. One couldn't help but marvel at his extraordinary mental fortitude.

“Let's go. After we give it a try, we need to write a reflection too.” As the student council president, he led the way.

The school's computer lab was enormous, and the computers inside were not ordinary machines but specialized devices with immense computational power—extremely advanced. They had been installed and calibrated with the help of Haoyu Group, and it was said that the school wasn't charged for them; instead, they were donated.

“This is the artificial intelligence learning system,” said Qian Zheng as he approached a computer as tall as a person. As the camera flashed, facial recognition was conducted, and then a voice said, “Qian Zheng, I am AI Xiao Chen, and I am delighted to assist your learning.”

“That voice...” Su Jie realized that the AI ‘Xiao Chen’ sounded exactly like his sister, Su Muchen. It was clearly modeled after her voice module.

“Hello,” Qian Zheng added, startled. Hearing the voice, he thought there was a person hidden inside the computer.

“Based on your multiple comprehensive exam papers, your performance is excellent, though there are some areas lacking. I can now train you specifically on the knowledge gaps in your studies. Pick up the electronic pen next to you; I'll give you some questions to work on to reinforce these gaps, and if you can't solve them, I'll explain them to you.”

This AI “Xiao Chen” was far superior to even the best teachers in the country. In fact, it was like a collective of many outstanding teachers, continuously innovating

to strengthen each individual's learning weaknesses and guiding them patiently, making the learning process enjoyable.

'Artificial intelligence is truly formidable; has teaching reached this level? And this is just ordinary AI—if it were high-tech, like the AI from the Tifeng Training Camp, I wonder how powerful it would be. No wonder even Coach Odell lost his job,' Su Jie thought.

After operating the AI learning system for an hour, the three of them each drew their own conclusions. The system had precompiled each student's exam scores, analyzed which knowledge points needed reinforcement, and then listed a series of problems along with instructional methods that rapidly improved the students' grades. Of course, all this still required the students to study hard on their own. Even with a coach like Odell, if the students feared pain and did not train, it would all be in vain. At present, no "black technology" has emerged that can imbue someone with "a century of prowess" like in the novels.

After some adjustments, Su Jie discovered that the AI learning system was indeed quite effective; for students who loved to study, it served as a superb assistant. With this system, it was as if numerous outstanding teachers were by their side, available 24 hours a day. But that was about it—it was merely a super learning assistant, somewhat more advanced than the various search engines available online.

"I think we've pretty much covered everything," Su Jie said as he bid farewell to Qian Zheng and Ning Zixi. "I'm heading home to rest. Tomorrow, I'll take some time to write up today's reflections in an email to the school administrators."

“I’ll study a bit longer. See you tomorrow,” Ning Zixi replied, fully engrossed in her studies.

And Qian Zheng had no intention of leaving either. Today, both of them had been stirred by Su Jie's example—even if they were extremely tired, they still chose to stay and study.

Su Jie took the subway straight home. Once there, he spent two hours practicing his boxing in the community’s open area before finally taking a shower, reading, and going to sleep.

By the time he lay down, it was already nine at night—a habit he had formed. When he slept, he still used the “Great Corpse State” of sleep, but now he had cultivated the ability to fall asleep in an instant whenever he wished and wake up the moment he wanted to. He was like an alarm clock that he could set precisely. Every moment was exact, every second utilized, his daily routine resembling that of a robot.

As he slept, his father, Su Shilin, quietly arrived at the door and listened to his breathing. He felt that Su Jie’s breaths were faint and delicate—at times barely perceptible, as thin as silk strands that seemed as if they might break at any moment, yet they never did. It was like the slim thread of life that persists between heaven and earth, the proverbial “last ray of hope.”

“This sleeping method—the Great Corpse State...has reached a state between life and death. If he goes any further, he’ll become like the Living Dead. What exactly has he encountered?” Su Shilin frowned deeply.

“What are you doing eavesdropping here? The child is already asleep,” his mother, Xu Ying, scolded as she approached and gave Su Shilin a light tap.

“Our son is truly extraordinary. His skills have genuinely reached a high level—I can hardly believe he developed them in just two months,” Su Shilin remarked, his emotions mixed as he pondered many things.

“I may not understand martial arts, but after all these years, I do know your difficulties,” Xu Ying said, inviting Su Shilin to sit down. “How do his skills compare to yours?”

“He’s still lacking a bit in finesse, but his technique is much purer than mine. I can’t even tell where his limits lie—maybe one day he’ll ascend to the level I’ve always dreamed of reaching,” Su Shilin replied.

“Then why not fully encourage him to practice martial arts? After all, he never falls behind in his studies,” Xu Ying suggested.

“There’s no need to push him. He’s already established a mature training system and formed his own ideas; no one can interfere with his path. We just need to observe,” Su Shilin suddenly chuckled. “The heavens have been kind to me, gifting me such a treasure.”

“Don’t get too cocky. There will be troubles ahead. Xu Shen has already come looking for me,” Xu Ying said with a hint of worry in her eyes.

“And what if he comes looking? Are we afraid of him? What era is this? We live our own lives, and the Xu family can live theirs. If they try to do anything, I’ll make sure they remember the pain of the past,” Su Shilin declared, his gaze as sharp as a knife.

“It’s not really related, but the old man is leaving, and he made a will that gave me a share of the estate,” Xu Ying added.

“Then just refuse it. We may not have much money now, but our lives are manageable, and our children are becoming more accomplished. Living peacefully is better than anything else,” Su Shilin said.

“I agree, though I fear things might not be that simple,” Xu Ying replied with some concern.

“When soldiers come, we block them; when water rises, we dam it. Don’t worry—I’ll handle everything,” Su Shilin assured, as steady as a mountain providing shelter from the storm.

In the following days, Su Jie continued his daily routine: waking at three in the morning to train for three hours, eating breakfast at six, and then heading off to school. At school, he attended classes as usual, worked out in the gym during breaks, and practiced for another three hours after classes ended. Every day was the same.

The atmosphere in the senior year was extremely tense, yet Su Jie remained completely at ease. In his final year, the curriculum was basically all about exams; he would finish each exam in under ten minutes, hand in his paper, leave the exam room, and head straight to the computer lab to look up various materials—or to the gym for a workout. This left him with plenty of spare time. The key was that he nearly always scored full marks on his exams. The teachers had become accustomed to his genius.

Time passed for a month—quietly and without incident. During that month, Su Jie completely settled his restless heart. He practiced the “Hoe Strike” technique repeatedly, and then used the school computer lab to search for various martial arts combat materials for his own study. Simultaneously, he taught himself a vast array of knowledge in anatomy, medicine, massage, acupuncture, meridians, yoga, meditation, and psychology, thereby adding a solid theoretical foundation to his cultivation.

During his two months at the Minglun Martial Arts Academy, his schedule had been jam-packed with training, sparring, massage, acupuncture, and electrical stimulation—all focused on enhancing his physical strength. Now, in addition to maintaining his physical training, he had embarked on the deepest level of academic research. In the process of this study, many aspects of his past training that he once did not understand began to make sense, and his gains were enormous.

He had come to realize that listening to his father and focusing on academic study proved even more effective than merely training his body.

Chapter 55: Starshine Combat Fitness Club

"Su Jie, you're amazing! You actually scored 740 on this monthly exam and ranked first in the entire city again."

In the classroom, everyone looked at the score report displayed on the screen. Su Jie was once again in first place, with Qian Zheng following closely behind at 720 points, and Ning Zixi at 719—just one point short of catching up to Qian Zheng.

However, the two of them were still far behind Su Jie.

In their senior year, they had small quizzes every day, but the real exams took place once a month.

After the monthly exam, the citywide scores would be compiled, and students would get a two-day break to relax. Otherwise, being under constant academic pressure every day would be overwhelming. Qian Zheng had been holding back his energy, determined to reclaim the top spot this time.

But Su Jie's score made him feel a sense of despair.

It was a complete and overwhelming defeat.

Yet, when the results were announced, Qian Zheng remained expressionless, giving no hint of the turmoil in his heart.

"Su Jie, we have a two-day break. Let's go to Qian Zheng's combat fitness gym to train together and work on our physical fitness," Ning Zixi suggested.

"Sounds good." Su Jie agreed with a smile. He had spent the past month practicing, studying, adjusting his mindset, and strengthening both his physical and mental conditioning. However, he hadn't had any real combat practice, and he was itching for a fight.

The Starshine Combat Fitness Club was one of the best training facilities in the city. It even had retired professional coaches, making it a great place to spar.

Over the past few days, Su Jie had read numerous martial arts articles, watched training videos of professional fighters from all over the world, and studied ancient boxing manuals. He had also analyzed historical matches in boxing, kickboxing, and mixed martial arts, gaining insights into the styles and strengths of many renowned fighters.

Beyond that, he had even researched the training regimens of special forces from various countries.

This was his true entry into the world of martial arts.

However, the deeper he delved, the more he realized how shallow his knowledge was. This field was incredibly vast. Without at least three to five years of dedicated study, it would be nearly impossible to grasp the fundamentals properly.

Hearing this, Qian Zheng's interest was piqued. He strode over confidently. "Su Jie, I see you've been training a lot lately. Every time you finish a test early, you head to the gym to work out. But that's just basic fitness. Without a professional coach, incorrect movements can lead to injuries. Let's go—Starshine has national-level professional trainers who can help with body sculpting."

Qian Zheng had noticed Su Jie's routine—finishing exams early and heading straight to the gym.

But he didn't take Su Jie's training seriously.

Especially that strange, slow-moving "Hoe Strike" technique, which he mistook for Tai Chi.

To him, it looked awkward and outdated—like something an elderly man in a park, brainwashed by a fake "Qi Master," would practice.

To most people, "Hoe Strike" did indeed look awkward and unsightly. The movement mimicked a pecking chicken, making the practitioner appear hunched like an old monkey or like a weathered farmer digging in the dirt.

Qian Zheng found this kind of training utterly ridiculous.

"Alright, let's go." Ning Zixi was excited. Recently, she had been feeling great—her fitness had improved significantly, and so had her academic performance. This time, she was only one point behind Qian Zheng in the monthly exam.

The three of them left the school.

As soon as they reached the school gate, a business car that had been parked at a distance drove up. A chauffeur stepped out to open the door for them, exuding an air of luxury.

Su Jie accepted the invitation to get in and immediately noticed that the interior of the car had been customized. It was lavishly decorated, featuring a mini-bar and plush sofas, showcasing an extravagant lifestyle.

Qian Zheng took two bottles of purified water from the mini-bar and tossed them to Su Jie and Ning Zixi. "This is fresh from Fiji, airlifted just now—not the kind you find in stores. The taste is exceptionally pure. Try it."

"The ones on the market these days are mostly fake." Ning Zixi casually opened a bottle, took a sip, and nodded. "This is indeed sourced from deep volcanic rock aquifers—completely unpolluted. You can tell from the taste."

Su Jie also took a sip but remained silent. He had never paid much attention to luxury brands of purified water or which country had the best ones. That was something for the wealthy and celebrities to care about.

The only water he regularly drank came from Minglun Martial Arts Academy, which was specifically designed for training purposes. It was actually quite expensive but highly effective.

Minglun Martial Arts Academy's training water contained added trace elements, specially formulated for fighters.

Professional fighters had to undergo urine and blood tests before and after matches to ensure they hadn't taken performance-enhancing substances. As a result, their drinking water had to be strictly controlled. Minglun Martial Arts Academy had developed a specialized brand of drinking water specifically for this purpose.

The business car soon arrived at an upscale fitness center.

The Starshine Combat Fitness Club occupied an entire high-rise building, designed like a five-star hotel with premium services.

However, after seeing the leisure facilities at Heart-Cleansing Manor, Su Jie felt that Starshine Combat Fitness Club was a level below. While it appeared grand and luxurious, it lacked a sense of true heritage.

"This building has sixty-two floors. The upper levels house a hotel, while the lower levels include the combat gym, fitness center, yoga studio, and spa. There's even a panoramic restaurant on the top floor..." Qian Zheng introduced the place enthusiastically. "My family developed this property years ago. Over the past ten years, its value has increased more than tenfold."

Su Jie could clearly hear the sense of superiority in Qian Zheng's words, but he didn't argue. He simply smiled and nodded.

This, however, dampened Qian Zheng's enthusiasm.

Qian Zheng had actually wanted to see Su Jie's shocked reaction, which would have given him a sense of superiority.

"Let's go to the combat area," Ning Zixi suggested to ease the atmosphere.

The combat area was quite large, with clearly defined sections: karate, kendo, judo, Muay Thai, boxing, and taekwondo. Each section had specialized instructors, and many people were training intensely.

Su Jie took a look around and noticed that most of the practitioners were elite white-collar professionals or wealthy second-generation heirs who were passionate about sports.

This was very different from Minglun Martial Arts Academy and Xixin Manor.

The students at Minglun Martial Arts Academy were mostly from less privileged families, often sent there for discipline, or foreigners eager to learn real martial arts. There were also people like Su Jie, who had once traveled from afar just to test himself. These students generally had lower social status.

On the other hand, Xixin Manor was purely a high-end retreat for the ultra-rich to train and rejuvenate.

Xingyao was somewhere in between. Most of its members were from the middle class. Even those wealthy second-generation heirs who were passionate about sports, while rich, had no real access to the upper echelons of society.

Su Jie had seen enough of the world to make an easy comparison. Ning Zixi and Qian Zheng came from wealthy families, but compared to Zhang Manman, they seemed to lack a certain aura.

"Nice!"

"Great strike!"

"Impressive punches and kicks!"

A burst of enthusiastic cheers echoed through the hall. The energy was familiar to Su Jie. Without even looking, he could tell that someone was competing in the ring.

Hearing those cheers, Su Jie felt a familiar itch deep inside—an uncontrollable excitement and urge to fight.

"Looks like my self-discipline still isn't strong enough," Su Jie said with a smile.

"What? Are you interested?" Qian Zheng raised an eyebrow. "I see you practicing traditional martial arts in the gym every day. Why not step into the ring and give it a try? We have small matches here daily, streamed live. Anyone can participate, and winners get prize money."

Without responding, Su Jie turned to look at the competition rules posted on the wall.

The rules were a direct copy of Minglun Martial Arts Academy's small-scale ring matches. However, the overall venue, the number of participants, and their skill levels were far inferior.

"Alright, I'd like to give it a try," Su Jie said, feeling a hint of excitement.

"Great!" Qian Zheng's eyes lit up. "The participants here are all highly skilled. Look at those two in the ring right now—one is a provincial Muay Thai champion, and the other is a veteran who has competed in many international fights. They're both instructors from other martial arts gyms who come here to make money. If you fight them, you'll definitely lose—it'd be pointless. Why don't we fight instead? I see you training so diligently every day; you must have some skill."

"That sounds perfect," Su Jie nodded.

"I'll go make the arrangements," Qian Zheng said, afraid Su Jie might back out. He immediately went to inform the staff.

The two instructors who had been fighting in the ring stopped and turned their attention to Su Jie and Qian Zheng as they stepped onto the platform.

"Gloves and protective gear," the referee, who was also a coach, handed them their equipment.

"Ready?" Qian Zheng immediately raised his guard, assuming a fighting stance. However, as he observed Su Jie, he noticed his opponent showed no intention of making a move. A trace of contempt appeared in his eyes.

Only amateurs acted like this.

"Begin!" The referee dropped his hand between them and stepped back to give them space.

Bang!

Qian Zheng fell flat on the ring.

"What just happened?"

Neither the referee nor the audience understood why he had suddenly fallen. The two fighters had barely made contact, and no punches had been thrown.

"Did I slip?" Qian Zheng got up, looking confused.

But since it was a match, there was no time to dwell on it. He quickly readjusted his stance and seized the opportunity to launch a fierce assault on Su Jie—throwing a flurry of punches.

Yet, just as he reached Su Jie, he tripped over something and lost his balance, crashing to the ground again.

This time, he saw it clearly—Su Jie had subtly extended his leg, hooking him just enough to make him stumble.

"You're using dirty tricks!" Qian Zheng was furious. He had thought he could easily overpower Su Jie, using this match to vent his frustration from his recent exam failures. But instead, he had been thrown to the ground twice, completely humiliating himself.

"Now that I know what to expect, you won't trip me again so easily. Once I catch an opening, I'll make sure you regret it," Qian Zheng vowed in his mind.

Lowering his stance and keeping his center of gravity stable, he cautiously advanced toward Su Jie, paying close attention to his footing.

Su Jie simply smiled, then hooked his foot again with a movement as swift as a snake's tail.

Bang!

Qian Zheng was tripped once more and fell to the ground again.

Chapter 56: The Midline Strike

"I refuse to believe it!"

When Qian Zheng got up, burning with anger, he attacked fiercely once again. Yet every time he closed in on Su Jie, he was hooked and thrown down.

Su Jie's leg hook was as elusive as a ghost—extending and retracting like a spring—while his foot acted like a scythe slicing through wheat, reaching out and pulling as if it could even cut down a tree. This leg technique is known as “Mandarin Duck Feet.”

In the "Water Margin", Wu Song was the master of this skill. The Jade Ring Steps and Mandarin Duck Feet, as showcased in the drunk-fight with Jiang Men Shen, were true masterpieces of this technique. In traditional Chinese martial arts, however, this falls under the category of leg thrusting and springing techniques.

Highly practical and stealthy, this hook disrupts an opponent's balance and is often used during entangling holds or in the very moment of contact. It is one of

Coach Gu Yang's eighteen practical free-fighting techniques. Some of these traditional unarmed combat techniques are so effective that the martial arts practiced in the military have been refined from them.

Once Su Jie began his unpredictable maneuvers, even a provincial-level professional fighter—not to mention Qian Zheng—would have struggled to keep up. After being thrown down four or five times in succession, Qian Zheng was already dizzy and unsteady. Yet the fire within him grew even stronger, and he was determined to defeat Su Jie at all costs.

Just as he launched his sixth attack, his shoulder was grabbed.

A coach had stepped in, signaling for the bout to stop, and whispered, "Little Zheng, this guy is really formidable. You're no match for him. Let me handle this."

"Coach Hua Xing, it's you." Seeing the coach, Qian Zheng calmed down. This was the head coach of Starshine Combat Fitness Club, hired at a high salary by his father—a former national-level combat sports athlete who had retired to teach here. Qian Zheng had trained with him on and off for three years, which had made him far superior to the average person.

"Didn't expect that even at your young age, your skills would be this good. How about a little fun?" Coach Hua Xing, taking Qian Zheng's place, addressed Su Jie.

Seeing this man, Su Jie knew he was not someone to be underestimated—just like the boxing coach Tang Jin he had seen at Heart-Cleansing Manor earlier.

“Head coach, let me continue. It really isn’t time for you to step in,” a younger coach nearby interjected, eager to redeem his “young boss’s” honor.

“Go down,” Hua Xing waved him off. “You’re not his match.”

“He’s that strong?” the young coach muttered in disbelief, but he obeyed and led Qian Zheng off the ring.

Ning Zixi, watching from below, had already realized that Qian Zheng and Su Jie were in entirely different leagues. While those in the thick of the fight might not notice, onlookers could clearly see that in front of Su Jie, Qian Zheng was no better than a three-year-old child, collapsing at a mere shout.

‘Since when did Su Jie become so strong?’ Ning Zixi wondered. She had spent a whole summer learning karate and had picked up some knowledge about combat sports. She knew Qian Zheng’s prowess—he had trained from a young age, was guided by a renowned coach, and had worked hard with proper nutrition.

Although he wasn’t a professional, he was undoubtedly one of the best amateurs around.

But Su Jie? His athletic performance used to be quite average—not weak, but nothing outstanding. How could he become a super master in just one summer?

“Interested in a little sparring?” Coach Hua Xing invited Su Jie once more.

“Sure, what are the rules?” Su Jie replied readily. He had been holding back for a long time, and now, regardless of the opponent’s level, he was eager to challenge them and stretch his muscles.

“What are your strengths, young man?” Hua Xing asked casually.

“I’m good with bare hands,” Su Jie responded as he removed his boxing gloves.

His signature move, known as the “Hoe Strike,” centered on a chopping motion—like a downward slash of a blade or a hoe digging into the earth. To maximize speed, his fingers had to be spread wide, like eagle talons grabbing, allowing air to rush through the gaps. Wearing boxing gloves, however, would obstruct the airflow and reduce the speed. It’s akin to a fly swatter, which needs many tiny holes in the center to effectively swat a fly.

In the era of cold weapons, the chopping technique was widely used. In modern combat, punches are typically limited to jabs, hooks, and uppercuts—omitting the crucial chopping punch, precisely because boxing gloves restrict the movement. However, in street fights, the chopping punch is widely employed, colloquially known as the “turtle punch.” Whether it’s cats, tigers, leopards, or monkeys, their slashing attacks share a similar nature.

This month, Su Jie had delved into the studies of kinesiology, biomechanics, and the coordination and continuity of various movements—enough to fill a tens-of-thousands-word paper. His understanding of the “Hoe Strike” and its evolution since his martial arts school days had deepened profoundly.

“Interesting,” Coach Hua Xing remarked as he watched Su Jie remove his gloves. He then took off his own gloves and signaled to the referee that the bout could begin.

“Begin!” the referee shouted.

At that moment, Hua Xing’s eyes suddenly flickered as he aimed at Su Jie’s ribs.

In an instant, he withdrew his gaze, performing the exact same deceptive move Tang Jin had used in the past.

His mastery of the “Eight Methods of Eye Techniques” was truly sublime.

Had Su Jie not already suffered a loss at Tang Jin’s hands earlier, he might have been fooled once again. But now things were different. Ignoring the deceptive glances, Su Jie bent his body low, tucking his shoulders inward and compressing his body toward the center. Wrapped up tight, he seemed to transform into the very edge of a blade, poised along the enemy’s midline and ready to strike.

This was the result of a month's worth of insights. He had incorporated the "Centerline Theory" of Wing Chun, referenced the ancient boxing manual's saying "With the feet on the middle gate, even immortals are hard to defend against," and studied many of the slashing techniques from Japanese kendo. After experimenting with these methods on Hua Xing, he was ready to test his skills.

"What is this? Kendo?" Hua Xing frowned.

Whoosh!

Su Jie had already lunged forward. His attack was directed along Hua Xing's centerline—what traditional Chinese medicine calls the "Ren meridian." The Ren meridian runs down the front center of the body, while the Du meridian runs along the back. Together, the Ren and Du meridians form a three-dimensional ellipse that envelops the human body.

Su Jie turned himself into a blade, cutting into the Ren meridian with a force akin to splitting mountains and parting rivers as he attacked Hua Xing. After a month of relentless practice and contemplation, he had never before engaged in actual combat. Now that he finally had an opponent, all his pent-up emotions were released in a move that felt as earth-shattering as a collapsing world.

It was as if the Monkey King, trapped beneath the Five Elements Mountain for five hundred years, had broken free—unstoppable.

Boom!

Hua Xing hadn't expected Su Jie to attack with such ferocity. In one swift move, his instincts kicked in, and his hands shielded the vulnerable center. By that time, Su Jie's strength had already taken hold of him. It was as if he'd been hit by a speeding car; Hua Xing was propelled to the edge of the ring, his body halted by the ropes. But the ropes couldn't withstand such power—they snapped outright, sending him tumbling from the ring.

“What a pity.”

Standing in the ring, Su Jie wasn't overjoyed by having sent Hua Xing flying. On the contrary, he recognized his own shortcomings.

According to the principles of mechanics, with that one powerful strike, all his strength should have pinned his opponent in place. Yet Hua Xing had managed to escape; although he was knocked off the ring, he remained uninjured.

In a street fight, this would mean his opponent could continue fighting, leaving the outcome uncertain.

Sure enough, Hua Xing shook his arms once he was off the ring and said, “Such great power—impressive, impressive. Let's go again.”

“Alright.”

Su Jie was eager for another round. A formidable opponent was exactly what he craved.

Hua Xing leaped back into the ring, and once again the two clashed.

Whoosh, whoosh, whoosh!

This time, Hua Xing took the initiative. His body moved with agility; his speed had increased as he swayed from side to side and struck forcefully from above and below, reminiscent of an elaborate fencing duel. This fighting style was known as the “Pirate Style.”

Su Jie, too, was moving, matching Hua Xing’s steps. As they circled each other, their punches and kicks were probing, with no intense, tangled skirmishes taking shape.

Now Hua Xing’s true skill began to show. Though he was a retired national-level athlete, and his combat prowess might not match that of the active top-tier fighters, his fundamentals were strong enough to quickly overpower many professional experts.

At the beginning, Hua Xing had been a bit careless, not fully concentrating. But after suffering a setback, he became completely focused, treating the bout with Su Jie as if it were a national championship match. Once he got serious, it was nearly impossible for Su Jie to land a finishing blow.

Occasionally, Hua Xing's strikes even landed on Su Jie. For a national-level fighter, even a light touch from such powerful punches and kicks would be unbearable for an ordinary person, not to mention full-force blows. Yet every time Hua Xing's strikes connected, they seemed to hit stone, and even his own limbs began to ache. In contrast, when Su Jie landed a hit on him, it carried a penetrating force that made even Hua Xing's bones and teeth feel numb.

"Enough, let's stop."

Even though the fight was still undecided, Hua Xing suddenly pulled back and gestured for a break.

"Hmm? Need a rest?"

Su Jie was just getting excited by the bout, so he felt a tinge of disappointment when his opponent halted the fight.

"Have you had special agent-level anti-strike training?" Hua Xing asked. "Your ability to withstand blows has already surpassed some of the limits of the national team."

“Something like that.”

Su Jie nodded. “How about we go again?”

“Not today. I’ve got other matters to attend to. Come by again sometime.”

Hua Xing felt that if the fight continued, his chances of victory might dwindle further. A loss could tarnish his reputation, perhaps even cost him his job.

‘If I had fought this kid at my peak, I believe I could have won. But now, this kid is fearless like a newborn calf, and my condition has declined. I still have a chance, but it isn’t high,’ Hua Xing admitted in his heart.

Su Jie noticed Hua Xing’s hesitation and understood. Smiling, he said, “Coach Hua Xing, you really gave me plenty of chances this time. In terms of experience, I’m nowhere near you. When I get the chance, I’d like to learn more from you.”

He wasn’t just offering polite words. Hua Xing was a retired national-level member with far more experience and had spent years coaching, mastering even the subtlest combat techniques.

Even if Su Jie was strong, his understanding was still superficial, and he knew he needed to exchange insights with seasoned veterans rather than letting his abilities go to his head.

Author's Words: Some readers have questioned how Su Jie managed to score so high and finish his exam in just over ten minutes. In truth, back in my school days, I really did know a top student like that. Su Jie's experience is similar to that of a classmate of mine. When I was in junior high, there was a classmate who always ranked in the middle among over fifty students—usually around the 20s or 30s. But after one winter break, his grades shot up and he consistently came first. Truly, underachievers can never imagine just how strong top students are. You can think of Su Jie as even more formidable than those astonishing prodigies on the “The Brain (最强大脑)” show. Take physical training, for example—when I do a plank, I can manage only three to five minutes, while the world record is eight hours. I just can't comprehend it.

Chapter 57: Mastering the Art of Cue Ball Positioning

"Let's go sit over there."

At this moment, Ning Zixi stepped in to diffuse the situation. She could see that Qian Zheng's mindset had become unbalanced after consecutive setbacks—he needed to take a moment to compose himself before he could recover.

"Su Jie, you're really amazing." Qian Zheng shook his head and accepted reality. He quickly calmed himself down.

"I'll have a chat with Xiaozheng about training." Hua Xing noticed Qian Zheng's shaken confidence, patted him on the shoulder, and led him aside for a talk.

"Su Jie, let's go over there and have some coffee while we wait for them." Ning Zixi invited Su Jie and led him skillfully to a nearby tea lounge.

Hua Xing took Qian Zheng to a quiet training room.

It was designed in a Japanese tatami style, with pure wooden decor and a faint scent of incense lingering in the air. A large "Zen" character was inscribed on the wall—an ideal environment for calming the mind and nurturing inner peace.

"Sit down."

Hua Xing said to Qian Zheng, "Your mindset is off balance, making you prone to extremes. Sit down and practice the meditation technique I taught you. Clear your mind, stay calm, and reflect rationally."

Qian Zheng sat cross-legged, but his face was flushed. Something was clearly weighing on his mind, preventing him from settling down.

"Coach, before the summer break, Su Jie couldn't compare to me in anything. At school, I was always ranked first in exams, and he was always second. In combat training, I could take on ten of him at once. How is it that after just one summer,

he has surpassed me in every way?" Qian Zheng lowered his voice, almost growling in frustration.

"Look at yourself—your expression is already twisted with resentment." Hua Xing said, "No one remains in first place forever. Your long-standing excellence has made you accustomed to being at the top, and now that you've fallen, you can't accept it. This is a critical moment for you—if you can't overcome this, then there's nothing more to say.

"In martial arts, you must face your opponents head-on and let go of personal pride. The moment you win a match, that victory becomes the past, and everything resets. Even world champions lose sometimes, don't they?"

"I understand what you're saying, but I just can't accept it. I want to take back my place." Qian Zheng's frustration eased slightly.

"With your current mindset, trying to reclaim your position will only drag you down further." Hua Xing said firmly.

"Coach, then what should I do?" Qian Zheng asked.

"It's simple—know yourself and know your enemy, and you'll never be defeated. You need to find out exactly how Su Jie managed to surpass you. Gather intelligence on his training methods and follow the same approach." Hua Xing instructed.

"Coach, this is what puzzles me the most. Logically, you came from the national team, and their training methods are the most advanced. You've been training me using the same standards—so how is it that he's..." Qian Zheng struggled to make sense of it.

"Hold on." Hua Xing raised his hand to interrupt him. "While I have incorporated some national team training methods into your regimen, your training volume isn't even a tenth of what those athletes undergo. Plus, you rarely engage in real combat. If you were to train in a national team camp for a while, you'd be several times stronger than you are now."

"As for Su Jie, I suspect he has undergone elite training similar to that of top international special forces. At the very least, his ability to withstand hits suggests as much. The level of suffering required for that kind of training is beyond what ordinary people can endure—even I struggle to understand it."

"Coach, are you saying that even you wouldn't be able to defeat him?" Qian Zheng asked.

"If we were competing under official rules, I would definitely win. But in a no-rules fight, the outcome would be uncertain. His moves are highly lethal and banned in regulated matches." Hua Xing admitted without hesitation. "My strength lies in ring combat, while someone trained for real-life combat and assassination techniques has a different edge. That being said, if I observe him for a while and analyze his techniques, defeating him wouldn't be a problem."

"You should actually be glad to have such a rival. He motivates you, pushes you forward, and prevents you from becoming complacent. Keep a calm mindset, observe him carefully like a strategist, and look for his weaknesses. Even Zhuge Liang, with his legendary brilliance, was eventually outlasted by the scheming Sima Yi, wasn't he?"

"Coach, I understand now." Qian Zheng finally calmed down.

"Good. Now practice ten minutes of diaphragmatic breathing and meditation. Settle your mind completely before going back out to face the challenge." Hua Xing instructed.

Meanwhile, in another lounge area, the aroma of coffee and desserts filled the air, and soothing music played softly. At the center of the lounge, someone was playing snooker.

Billiards is considered a gentleman's sport, much like golf and bowling, making it a favorite pastime for elites who prefer less intense physical activity.

Su Jie and Ning Zixi sat together, waiting for Qian Zheng.

"Su Jie, you hit Qian Zheng so hard this time that he completely lost confidence. Coach Hua Xing is helping him recover psychologically now. But I'm really curious—what exactly happened to you over the summer? Can you tell me?" Ning Zixi asked eagerly.

"I just went to Minglun Martial Arts Academy to train, that's all. I studied traditional Chinese martial arts." Su Jie replied with a smile. "You should give up practicing karate and learn Chinese martial arts instead. Actually, karate itself originated from Chinese martial arts—it was once called 'Tang Hand,' after all." (G: It developed from the indigenous Ryukyuan martial arts (called te (手), "hand") under the influence of Chinese martial arts, Tang Shou Tao.)

"Then can you teach me?" Ning Zixi asked expectantly.

"I'm still learning myself—how could I possibly teach anyone?" Su Jie declined politely. Just as he was about to say something more—

Traang!

The sharp sound of a cue ball striking interrupted his thoughts.

"Nice!"

The exclamation came from the snooker table.

The two players were a foreigner and a young Chinese man.

Both of them played exceptionally well, but the Chinese youth was clearly superior. His shots were smooth and seamless, balancing offense and defense perfectly—it was obvious he was giving the foreigner a lesson.

Su Jie watched for a few shots and found himself completely drawn in.

Trrraang!

The young man took a shot, and the cue ball struck the red ball, sending it straight into the pocket, while the cue ball took the red ball's place, remaining completely still.

This was a stop shot.

When taking another stop shot, the young man sank unconsciously and thrust the cue stick with great force—as if wielding a spear. At the very moment of contact with the cue ball, he suddenly halted, as though he had transferred all his strength into the ball.

In this way, after the cue ball hit and sent the red ball flying, it would remain in position.

Trrraang!

Another shot followed, this time a draw shot.

The cue stick extended and retracted, quickly pulling back so that after the cue ball struck the red ball, it recoiled instead of continuing forward with its inertia.

Su Jie carefully observed the young man's application of force in his billiards technique, along with the trajectories of both the cue ball and the red ball. He recalled that during his earlier match against Hua Xing, although his strike had pushed Hua Xing back, it had cost his opponent ninety-nine percent of his power.

If one could force the opponent's shot to stop—or even execute a draw shot—wouldn't that be even better?

"I understand now," Su Jie thought as a flash of inspiration struck him.

In his mind, he began to combine the techniques and physics of billiards with martial arts, and many moves seemed to acquire subtle new variations and insights.

Especially with the “Hoe Strike” move, he discovered that it contained even more techniques and variations.

This move was simply marvelous—in every moment when he thought he had mastered all its subtleties, a new insight would emerge. It seemed that the art behind this move was truly inexhaustible.

“Hey, Qian Zheng and the others are here—let’s go train,” Ning Zixi said as she saw Qian Zheng and Hua Xing come out, snapping Su Jie out of his trance. She had intended to ask him about how he had changed over the summer, but he paid her no attention, fixated on the billiards, which made her feel somewhat uncomfortable.

“How’s the environment here?” Qian Zheng asked, seemingly completely recovered from the shadow of his previous defeat.

“It’s excellent—perfect for training,” Su Jie replied with a smile. “You usually train with Coach Hua Xing, right? May I observe?”

“From now on, we’ll train together,” Qian Zheng said earnestly. “Su Jie, you’re really impressive. I wonder if you’d be willing to accept my offer to become a coach here. I’ll learn under you, and you’d receive a monthly salary of 100,000. Would you be willing?”

“Are you serious?” Su Jie asked, looking at Qian Zheng. He hadn’t expected Qian Zheng to actually make such an offer.

“Of course I’m serious,” Qian Zheng nodded. “Please, I beg you! And it won’t interfere with your studies—you can even train me at school. Whatever training requirements you have, I can fulfill them, whether it’s training equipment, massage therapists, nutritionists, or health coaches. Everything you need is available here.”

“Um...” Su Jie considered for a moment. “Alright.”

“Then I’ll have someone prepare the contract immediately,” Qian Zheng said, his face lighting up with joy as he saw Su Jie agree.

At that moment, Hua Xing nodded slightly at Qian Zheng’s actions, a satisfied smile on his face.

It was clear that Qian Zheng’s mindset had completely transformed. The best way to surpass a strong opponent wasn’t through envy, but by learning from them and then using their strengths against them.

As early as the Qing Dynasty, wise men had proposed the idea of “using the strengths of others to defeat them.”

Soon, a formal coaching contract was drafted.

Su Jie picked it up and examined it carefully. He vividly remembered when Liu Zihao had tried to make him sign that so-called “sell-out” contract—which he refused. Later, Zhou Chun even staged a scam incident in an attempt to force him into signing a contract, and then Feng Hengyi sent “Gray Wolf” over, even pulling out a dagger to threaten him into signing.

After that, he had developed a certain wariness towards contracts, and over the past month he had learned a great deal about legal matters.

That was why he was now so sharp when reviewing contracts.

“This clause can be modified, and this one as well... also, the wording in this clause could be changed to this,” Su Jie said as he took out a pen and methodically made amendments to the contract, looking extremely professional—as if he were an experienced lawyer who negotiated regularly. This caused Hua Xing, Qian Zheng, and Ning Zixi to regard him with renewed admiration.

“Su Jie, have you studied law? How do you know so much about this?” Ning Zixi asked, growing increasingly surprised.

“I know a little,” Su Jie replied after finishing his amendments and handing the contract back to Qian Zheng.

Qian Zheng readily agreed.

Originally, the contract from Starshine Combat Fitness Club was designed to be extremely favorable to the company, but after Su Jie's amendments, it had become very fair. Moreover, Qian Zheng's real intention was to learn the secret of becoming stronger quickly from Su Jie—not to take advantage of him through the contract.

Su Jie had his own reasons for agreeing. The atmosphere at the Starshine Combat Fitness Club was quite good—it was conducive to training in martial arts, and provided many opportunities for exchange, especially since there was so much to learn from Hua Xing. Also, Qian Zheng had kept a humble attitude; after all, they were classmates, not enemies, so it would be nice to become friends.

Su Jie always believed that having many friends was better than having many enemies.

Of course, having enemies like Zhou Chun and Feng Hengyi wasn't really in his control.

Chapter 58: Tempering and Honing, Sharpen the Edge

After signing the contract, Qian Zheng eagerly wanted to learn the secret of becoming strong in two months from Su Jie, proposing to start training immediately. The four of them went to a separate, quiet training venue equipped with various gear.

“How should I train for quick results?” Qian Zheng asked.

Hua Xing watched Su Jie with interest, curious about how his methods differed from the national team’s. The national team couldn’t turn a clueless teenager into an expert in two months.

“Do you want to improve physical fitness or focus on fighting?” Su Jie asked.

“Both,” Qian Zheng replied instantly.

“Then we’ll do hard conditioning,” Su Jie said, recalling how Odell trained him. “Follow me for a warm-up.”

He began Odell’s joint exercises, with Qian Zheng mimicking. “Is this... Tai Chi?” Qian Zheng doubted the slow movements but followed. After finishing, he was stunned as Su Jie led him through martial drills: push-ups, squats, planks, frog jumps, jump rope, pull-ups, wall crawls, and more.

Ten minutes in, Qian Zheng was gasping, vision blurring. “Can’t... can’t go on... need a break...”

“This is just the warm-up. I’ve reduced my usual load by three times for you,” Su Jie shook his head. “This routine preheats every muscle and joint, filling them with lactic acid. That’s what makes hard conditioning effective. Without lactic acid buildup, striking practice would harm soft tissues.”

Su Jie demonstrated, flowing through high-intensity movements effortlessly, leaving Hua Xing stunned.

Sweating, Su Jie stripped off his shirt, revealing a chiseled torso.

“Holy crap!” Ning Zixi blurted, her school beauty persona slipping. Only expletives could capture her shock at Su Jie’s physique.

His muscles weren’t bulky but perfectly defined, glistening with sweat, a bronze tint on smooth, fair skin.

‘Indestructible Vajra Body! Shaolin Bronze Skin,’ Qian Zheng thought, recalling martial arts novels.

“Damn,” Hua Xing muttered inwardly.

Su Jie's physique wasn't always this striking, but Nie family's secret ointment, combined with massage, acupuncture, and electric stimulation, had transformed him. The Nie family historically served the imperial palace, crafting health regimens for emperors.

Liu Guanglie of Minglun Martial Arts Academy, once a Shaolin disciple, collaborated with them to develop traditional fitness formulas, refined with modern medicine into ointments and tonics.

Though Su Jie was a test subject for Nie Shuang and Uncle Mang, he reaped real benefits.

"I'm gonna pass out," Qian Zheng collapsed after battle ropes, lying motionless, uncaring even if threatened with a knife.

"Too weak. Get up!" Su Jie adopted a coach's tone, knowing this was a test of willpower. Giving up now meant no hope for hard conditioning later. But no matter how he urged or pulled Qian Zheng up, it was futile—he'd do a few moves and collapse again, a puddle of mud.

"Bro, slow down. You can't get fat in one bite," Qian Zheng begged, his rich-kid swagger gone.

“Su Jie, this explosive overload could cause sudden death. Even the national team doesn’t start like this. Stop,” Hua Xing frowned.

“It’s fine. This is limit training, and the initial sequence gradually opens cardiopulmonary function,” Su Jie waved off. “I can tell his body’s okay. This is about mental grit. Without strong will, the next step is impossible.”

Qian Zheng couldn’t pass this martial drill, let alone hard conditioning.

“Tomorrow... let’s try tomorrow. I need a breather,” Qian Zheng pleaded.

“Then I can’t help you,” Su Jie sighed.

Even the best coach needs a willing student. In this state, even Odell couldn’t help.

‘My stamina was worse than Qian Zheng’s back then, yet I endured Odell’s training. Why can’t he? Is my willpower naturally stronger, or is my drive for martial arts greater?’ Su Jie pondered, watching Qian Zheng rest.

“Let’s spar,” Hua Xing invited. “I didn’t go all out earlier. Show me your real skill.”

“Perfect,” Su Jie said, eager to apply mechanics insights from billiards to his “Hoe Strike.”

Bang!

They clashed, fists and feet flying.

“What’s this?” Hua Xing felt a force tilting him forward after a strike, unable to retreat or dodge.

Su Jie’s new insight was working—a refined “Hoe Strike” with subtle changes.

‘Hua Xing’s the real deal,’ Su Jie realized during the fight. At Minglun Martial Arts Academy, only Feng Hengyi surpassed him in sparring. As a retired national-level fighter, Hua Xing was a senior coach even there, a rare match for Su Jie’s level.

They sparred five minutes, rested ten, repeating for three hours.

Su Jie was still eager, but Hua Xing showed fatigue.

“Young blood wins,” Hua Xing conceded, feeling he’d gained much from Su Jie’s skill.

Su Jie benefited more, finally “sating his hunger.”

A month passed quickly. Su Jie’s days were fulfilling—school, exams, and training Qian Zheng at Starshine Combat Fitness Club. After tests, Qian Zheng joined him in the gym and computer lab, studying together. Outsiders were surprised to see the rival top students become friends.

At Starshine Combat Fitness Club, Su Jie and Hua Xing formed a vibrant study group, attracting S City’s top fighters for exchanges, rapidly boosting Su Jie’s skills. His nutrition matched Qian Zheng’s—Nie family health meals, plus ointments and supplements ordered from Minglun Martial Arts Academy.

Under Su Jie’s training, Qian Zheng improved significantly. Even Hua Xing was amazed at Minglun’s supplements, surpassing national team standards. Yet Qian Zheng still hadn’t met the martial drill standard, let alone hard conditioning.

Once, trying hard conditioning, Su Jie struck Qian Zheng’s stomach lightly. He crumpled like a boiled shrimp, tears streaming—utterly fragile. Su Jie could only train him gradually.

Even for hard conditioning, Su Jie could only strike Qian Zheng's muscles, not precise points like joints or acupoints. He hadn't learned a tenth of Odell's skill. Still, his basic methods sufficed for Qian Zheng.

In the second monthly exam, Qian Zheng scored 710, but Su Jie hit 730, crushing his hopes. Worse, training daily with Su Jie showed him Su Jie's monstrous strength—ten times his workload, yet brimming with energy. Sometimes, sparring ended in three seconds flat.

Qian Zheng knew his own progress was huge, but the gap with Su Jie widened—Su Jie improved faster. Gradually, his jealousy faded into admiration, even a hint of awe.

“Coach Su, give me a break for a couple days. I need total rest,” Qian Zheng requested.

“Alright, you've earned it,” Su Jie agreed, knowing Qian Zheng's exhaustion, and trained alone.

Seeing Su Jie head to train without rest, Qian Zheng's eyes held complex emotions. *‘What a freak. No wonder I can't match him. This month showed me the gap—willpower. He endures pain and grind I can't. Am I too spoiled?’*

‘This month, my training and fight experience haven't slacked,’ Su Jie reflected en route to the gym. Xingyao's great vibe, skilled fighters, top-notch conditions, and

ample nutrition rivaled Minglun, despite lacking Uncle Mang's massage and acupuncture. As a regular Minglun student, not a signed athlete, he hadn't had such perks there.

Uncle Mang's treatments had concluded anyway—Su Jie's hard conditioning had reached a solid foundation. His qi and blood flowed with intent, filling his body, rendering further stimulation ineffective. Now, he relied on daily mental focus to “circulate energy,” steadily growing stronger.

He felt his resilience rising, a stirring like a silkworm breaking its cocoon, hinting at a breakthrough in hard conditioning.

If July and August at Minglun were forging steel, burning out impurities, then September and October at school were tempering and honing. No sparks flew, but this gentle refinement was shaping Su Jie's edge.

Chapter 59: The Crisis Begins to Emerge

Qian Zheng was slacking off, so Su Jie carried his backpack alone to the Starshine Combat Fitness Club.

It was his daily routine.

Normally, high school seniors had to attend evening self-study until 10 p.m. before resting. They'd rise at 5:30 a.m. to study. But Su Jie had gotten permission from his homeroom teacher and school leaders to skip evenings.

Other students would've been scolded, even disciplined or had parents called, but Su Jie got his leave easily.

Why? His grades were stellar. Even without studying, he always ranked first, acing every test.

Sometimes, questions that stumped teachers were solved with a glance from him.

This left teachers and school leaders speechless.

More importantly, they knew he went to the Starshine Combat Fitness Club for fitness. His excellent grades were tied to his physical health, so they supported his training.

They even asked him to share his fitness and study tips multiple times.

He squeezed onto the subway with a large, heavy backpack containing knee pads, hand wraps, gloves, water, various ointments, medicinal oils, and supplements for stamina.

This top-tier gear was bought from the Minglun Martial Arts Academy's official website, costing a fortune. Some supplements were prescribed by Uncle Mang.

Uncle Mang stayed in touch online. Every week, he had Su Jie get medical checkups, test various metrics, and send the data. Then he'd prescribe supplements.

Daily intake of trace elements was meticulously calculated.

Su Jie's rapid progress over the past two months owed much to Uncle Mang.

Of course, Su Jie was also studying nutrition and human physiology, consulting Uncle Mang when stumped, practically becoming his research student.

Uncle Mang, a Cambridge Medical School Ph.D., was more than qualified to guide him.

After a half-hour subway ride, Su Jie emerged at a bustling intersection.

The Starshine Combat Fitness Club was ahead.

Suddenly, a young man with a briefcase appeared. “You’re Su Jie, right?”

“Who are you?” Su Jie eyed him. The man exuded sharpness, with thin lips suggesting he lived by his words.

“I’m Dai Xing, department manager at Heisen Headhunting.” He handed over a business card.

“Headhunting? For me? To be a coach?” Su Jie was about to decline.

“I’m here on behalf of someone hoping to contact your sister, Dr. Su Muchen,” Dai Xing said quickly.

“For my sister? Who’s trying to poach her?” Su Jie paused. He’d long felt Haoyu Group wasn’t a place to stay.

From witnessing Feng Yuxuan’s disgraceful behavior to Feng Hengyi’s tyranny, and subordinates like “Gray Wolf” who casually brandished daggers, the company seemed far from simple. He’d urged his sister to leave multiple times, but she brushed it off.

If a reliable major company was interested, he’d want her to jump ship.

“Come with me,” Dai Xing said, seeing a chance, and led the way with a bow.

A car pulled up, weaving through twists and turns to a small building tucked in the city center.

“This is...” Su Jie noticed a traditional Chinese courtyard amidst towering skyscrapers. This was City B’s famous wealthy district, where surrounding high-rises cost over 200,000 yuan per square meter. These courtyards? Three to five billion yuan, and even money couldn’t buy one without special status.

The car entered, stopping at the deepest courtyard. The garage door opened automatically. Su Jie and Dai Xing got out.

“Self-driving?” Su Jie realized the car had no driver. It navigated autonomously, with brakes and steering moving on their own—eerie.

“I’ve read about self-driving online, but seeing it today...” Su Jie was stunned. The car’s precision in dodging, turning, reversing, and parking surpassed any driving instructor.

“Technology shapes the future,” Dai Xing said with a smile. “Let’s go. The company’s owner wants to show you their strength. Whatever Haoyu Group offers, they can match.”

'Self-driving at this level is impressive, top-tier tech. It's a form of AI, and since my sister's an AI research expert, it makes sense they'd want her,' Su Jie thought, following Dai Xing into the courtyard.

"Magnificent." The classical Chinese courtyard blended modern simplicity and brightness. A small pond with clear water and large koi fish created a serene atmosphere. A breeze made it refreshing. The courtyard, roughly estimated, spanned over a thousand square meters.

The main living room had a huge floor-to-ceiling window. Inside, a few people were brewing tea, surrounded by walls lined with books, exuding scholarly charm.

'If my family could own a place like this...' Su Jie mused. *'When I was little, my sister brought me here and pointed at these courtyards, saying she'd buy one for Mom and Dad someday.'*

"Boss, Su Jie's here," Dai Xing said, entering the living room with a servile demeanor.

"Good job. Your reward's coming. You're dismissed," one man waved.

Dai Xing left with a gleeful expression, knowing a hefty bonus awaited.

“You’re Dr. Su Muchen’s brother, Su Jie, right?” The man beckoned him to sit and sip tea.

Four men, all under thirty-five, dressed casually but radiating wealth and status, sat there. Two looked familiar from entertainment news—rich second-generation heirs.

“Hello,” Su Jie greeted, unfazed, sitting down confidently.

The lead young man’s eyes flickered at his boldness.

“Su Jie, what do you think of this courtyard?” he asked without introducing himself.

“Very nice,” Su Jie replied, noting the decor’s understated quality. Simple details used the finest materials.

“We’ve started a new AI company, including self-driving tech, which you saw on the way here,” the leader said. “I’m Lu Shu, chairman. If your sister leaves Haoyu Group with her team, this courtyard is her signing bonus. How’s that?”

“This courtyard?” Su Jie was shocked. Even as a high schooler, he knew it was worth billions. Could they really give it away?

“Don’t believe me? I, Lu Shu, keep my word. Once she signs, it’s hers, written in the contract,” Lu Shu said casually, as if the courtyard meant nothing.

“Just a trifle for us,” another young man added. “We know your sister’s deal at Haoyu Group. Even if Feng Yuxuan keeps his promises, her gains would be this much. We can offer ten times that, and Feng might not even deliver.”

“I can’t decide this,” Su Jie said, unmoved. After donating 200,000 yuan once, he’d mastered his desire for wealth. “But if you’re serious, I can discuss it with her.”

“Good,” the men exchanged glances. “Let’s set a time—tomorrow. Bring your sister here to discuss the contract. As a token of sincerity, take these small gifts.”

Lu Shu handed over a card and a phone. “I know you’re into fighting. Log into the website on this card with this phone. You can buy things unavailable on the market to boost your physique.”

Su Jie was about to refuse when he glanced at the card’s web address—it resembled one Odell had given him. He took it instantly.

When Odell left, he'd provided a URL, account, and password for purchases, but Su Jie could never log in.

"Could it be..." Su Jie's heart stirred. He accepted the phone and card, not trusting these rich kids but trusting Odell.

"It's settled then," Lu Shu said, hinting for Su Jie to leave.

Su Jie felt he had little to say to these heirs and took his leave.

They didn't offer a ride, a slight snub.

"Brother Shu, why not send him off?" one young man asked.

"If we did, we'd miss a good show. You think Feng Yuxuan won't know we're poaching Su Muchen?" Lu Shu said coolly. "Let me be clear: the Feng family's intelligence network is far superior. They've likely planted people in our company or bugged it. After all, Feng Shoucheng's youngest son is back."

"Who's his youngest son?" The others were clueless.

“Feng Shoucheng sent his youngest to a secretive training camp at a young age for world-class espionage training—over a decade,” Lu Shu explained. “Now he’s back, building a commercial espionage system for Haoyu Group.”

“So we have no secrets?” The heirs exchanged worried looks.

“No worries, I’ve got a plan,” Lu Shu waved dismissively. “We must poach Su Muchen’s team. Their breakthroughs in AI’s toughest areas are incredible. With their core tech, our self-driving system can go into mass production globally. Our company could become a super-giant. Look at foreign companies like ‘Mask’—a few young guys built a social platform and hit a \$500 billion valuation in five years. Our conditions are far better than theirs were. There’s no reason we can’t succeed.”

“Su Muchen’s team started as college dormmates, all becoming grad students and Ph.D.s, then founding a company. They’re academic stars but terrible at business, bankrupting multiple times until Feng Yuxuan scooped them up,” one said.

Lu Shu clenched his fist. “I have a feeling whoever controls Su Muchen’s team will shape the future of global business.”

Chapter 60: The Gray Wolf Reappears

“Su Muchen’s team has indeed mastered some core technologies, but that’s her business. I hear Feng Yuxuan is pursuing her now. Even if we win over her brother, we can’t control her actions, right?” A “young master” in a casual shirt and an expensive watch still had doubts.

“That kid Feng Yuxuan is a mess—chasing girls everywhere. One day it’s a third-rate starlet, the next it’s an influencer by his side. His private life is wilder than ours, no decency. But his business mind is sharp. So far, no girl has gotten the better of him. They all want to marry into wealth, but he tires of them and dumps them. Yet, the media loves him.” Another “young master” spoke with envy and jealousy.

“People like that can’t be underestimated,” Lu Shu said to the two. “Jiang Yuan, Fan Chuan, you’ve done well with the company’s financing and business. We’ve got funds, connections, and channels—everything but technology. Honestly, we’re not tech people; we can only poach from outside. This time, we unite to snag Su Muchen’s team. It’s my company’s big strategy, the top priority this year. Everything else takes a backseat. No objections, right?”

“None here,” said a “young master” who’d been quietly on his phone. His words carried little weight. “Brother Shu, you’re our backbone. Whatever you say goes. I agree we lack a core tech team.”

“Then it’s settled,” Lu Shu decided, turning to the phone guy. “How’s Uncle Li been?”

“Dad’s doing great. He’s learning fitness qigong with Master Ma lately—looks healthier than me,” the “young master” replied, setting down his phone. His delicate face, a “boyish femininity,” fit the ancient “Ma Yi Physiognomy (Ma Yi Shen Xiang)” —either a lowly actor or a top-tier strategist, like Zhang Liang, “as beautiful as a woman.”

“Master Ma? My dad trusts him too. After we got that land for development, problems kept popping up—workers falling, safety issues, approval delays. Master Ma redid the feng shui, and everything smoothed out. I didn’t believe it before, but now I’m convinced,” Jiang Yuan marveled.

“I don’t buy it,” Fan Chuan scoffed. “What era is this? Still into mystical nonsense? It’s all trickery. History shows no one succeeded with this stuff. When the Jin attacked in the Song Dynasty, the emperor trusted a fraud, Guo Jing, thinking he’d summon heavenly soldiers. But in the end, the city fell, he was captured—resulting in the Jingkang Shame.”

“I’d rather believe it’s real than not,” Lu Shu said, waving it off. “Confucius said respect ghosts and gods but keep your distance—don’t touch it, don’t mock it. Live and let live. Li Zhi, how about you handle Su Jie? You’ve been on your phone since he arrived, but you’re secretly watching him.”

“Su Jie’s not simple,” said Li Zhi, the feminine-faced “young master.” “But Brother Shu’s got a plan to hook him. He won’t resist.”

“The dark web has plenty to offer. Once he’s in, he’ll be hooked, and we’ll have him,” Lu Shu nodded. “But the details are on you, Li Zhi. Don’t underestimate Su Jie’s importance to Su Muchen—her Morning Dawn Studio’s name says it all.” (G: Morning Daown = Chen Jie. Chen from Su Muchen, Jie from Su Jie.)

“She’s a brother-obsessed nut,” Fan Chuan laughed. “That makes it easy. We just need to act before Feng Yuxuan does.”

“Watch and see,” Lu Shu said. “Su Muchen’s team is worth over ten billion, so don’t skimp on small costs when poaching.”

Su Jie stepped out, winding through the complex. Without his sharp memory, he'd have gotten lost in this neighborhood.

"A real rich man's area," he muttered, glancing back at the deep villa cluster. Ordinary folks couldn't afford this in a millennium. "These young masters gift houses at a meeting—they're quite the big spenders. But they don't seem like good partners. This phone and card—I'll let my sister check them. She's better with computers. I won't use them lightly and fall into a trap."

He eyed the phone and card—unfamiliar models. Passing a street corner alley, he tucked them into his backpack and adjusted it.

Standing up, he saw someone at the alley's mouth.

First, a pair of military boots—foreign issue, field-grade.

Broad shoulders, casual sportswear, a hat pulled low, shadowing the face.

The presence felt familiar.

“Gray Wolf.”

The mercenary who’d threatened him with a dagger at Minglun Martial Arts Academy to sign a contract—ex-foreign soldier, under Feng Hengyi.

“Kid, we meet again.”

Gray Wolf lifted his hat, revealing a menacing face. “You’ve got guts. I let you off once, but now you’re digging at my boss’s wall. I heard everything you said with Lu Shu’s rich brats. Come with me—don’t run, or my dagger won’t spare you.”

“You’re not afraid of breaking the law? Carrying a controlled weapon gets you detained,” Su Jie said, still crouching. He felt Gray Wolf’s gaze locked on him—any move, and he’d pounce.

This Gray Wolf could kill and had before. No room for carelessness.

His nerves tightened to the limit.

“The law? You don’t know how many I’ve killed,” Gray Wolf sneered. “Less talk, move!”

“Then come on,” Su Jie said.

Fearless, he kicked his backpack up, launching it at Gray Wolf.

Gray Wolf dodged, as if expecting it, moving like a centipede. A black dagger slid from his sleeve—no shine, even the edge dark—and slashed at Su Jie’s shoulder, elbow, and wrist joints. Vicious strikes, not fatal but crippling, permanent damage.

Joint injuries don’t heal.

A shoulder hit would limit Su Jie's punches, even heavy lifting—essentially scrapping his martial skills.

Gray Wolf aimed to ruin him from the start.

The dagger streaked down.

Bang!

A stick appeared, striking the blade.

The dagger fell.

Gray Wolf flinched, seeing Su Jie now wielding nunchucks.

Su Jie lunged, no words, swinging the nunchucks at Gray Wolf's head with a hoeing strike.

Gray Wolf's other hand arced a dagger, willing to take a head blow to sever Su Jie's wrist.

Cold-weapon combat—swift, perilous.

Su Jie dropped the nunchucks, letting the dagger miss, then struck with “Viper's Thrust,” hitting Gray Wolf's wrist.

Snap!

Gray Wolf's arm numbed, dropping the dagger.

Su Jie kicked both blades away, leaving the nunchucks.

Both unarmed now.

“Gray Wolf, you flashed a dagger at me last time, so I prepared—hid nunchucks in my bag, waiting for you. You tailed me from the complex exit, thinking I didn’t notice?” Su Jie’s calm was beyond a high schooler’s.

“Not bad, kid,” Gray Wolf said, shaking his numb hand, baring wolfish teeth. “You surprise me, but the outcome won’t change.”

Su Jie didn’t reply. He slid forward, as if slipping on ice, tilting toward Gray Wolf.

In that tilt, he guarded his head, closed in, twisted for power, drilled through defenses, seized position, and struck—dozens of micro-moves in an instant.

“Hoe Strike” flowed naturally, like eating or walking.

“Fight like you walk.”

Su Jie had now mastered this ancient boxing technique.

Gray Wolf jolted—Su Jie was on him in a flash.

Now, Su Jie was leagues beyond his Minglun days—unimaginably stronger.

In two months, studying and training, he'd refined his skills, his mindset settling into “dragon in the field” poise.

Sparring with Xingyao's seasoned pros had transformed him.

Speed, stamina, penetration, positioning—all perfected.

“Courting death,” Gray Wolf growled. Unable to dodge, he kneed upward—ideal against close attacks.

But Su Jie's hands slammed down, hitting the knee, throwing Gray Wolf off balance, nullifying the strike. Su Jie advanced, another "Hoe Strike" crashing toward Gray Wolf's chest.

Gray Wolf crumbled, retreating, barely escaping, his clothes were shredded.

Su Jie pressed on, relentless, a tidal wave of strikes—rising, falling, unending.

"No enemy, no blood, no return!"