

Chapter 4: The Ancient Art Of Sustenance

Doing physical activity wasn't the hard part about sport. Young bodies like his were hardwired to be able to release a burst of adrenaline to do feats thought to be impossible without any kind of preparation.

The walk home from Ganfu slamming to the ground was the easy part. The hard part was waking up once his body stopped pushing adrenaline across his entire system and realizing how *screwed* he truly was. He felt like he had been lit on fire for hours straight. The act alone of getting out of bed was like thousand of glass shards were being jabbed into his skin. By the time he was up, Rovest wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed and sleep the day away.

Don't pussy out. Gregory's words echoed in his head. There was too much to lose. How could he live with himself if he just threw out this chance? Considering the piss poor standards for hiring that Gregory was working with, they would no doubt find a replacement for him in no time if he backed out. He *had* to do it, no matter how painful it would be.

When he and Gregory met in the parking lot, the atmosphere was thick and no longer jovial. No greetings or jokes were exchanged. The concern was written all over the red panda's face, but Rovest couldn't bring himself to confront the awkward air around them. He wasn't *hurt*—there were no bruises or fractures—but the concern was completely understandable. Gregory looked like he hadn't had a day of exercise in years, so he probably didn't know the ins and out of Ganfu's training after such a long gap in training.

While getting out of the car, Rovest finally heard Gregory speak up after minutes of silence.

"Make sure you stretch first."

Rovest gave a warm but halfhearted smile. "Yeah, of course. I'll just change out of my clothes first."

"Suit yourself, kiddo." With a lighter in one hand and a cigar in the other, he lit it up and stared away at the mountains in the distance.

Opening the door, Rovest expected Ganfu to greet him with yet another throw to the ground. Once he got thinking, it was impossible to stop. The multiple ways that Ganfu could send him across the room had been playing in the back of his mind like a never-ending horror movie. With eyes almost closed, he braced himself for impact as he winced... only to be greeted by the scent of food instead of pain across the back.

Small, wooden tables were evenly distributed across the tatami mat floor—all of them with plates filled to the brim. They overflowed with food—a little nudge probably being enough to push the food to stain the matting.

A single, large man surrounded all the plates like a mountain towering over a valley of lakes and hills. Ganfu—chopsticks in hand—kept taking out of each bowl in an orderly sequence that made it look as if he was making his way through a pseudo assembly line. The food went

down the hatch without any kind of trouble. Chewing didn't seem to pass the lion's mind—gulping down with grace and celerity.

Wiping the leftover soup on the corner of his mouth away, Ganfu finally noticed Rovest's presence. "Oh, little one! Sorry for not waiting for your arrival. I guess I just got too hungry..."

Even when letting out an awkward chuckle, his voice was still gravely deep. The age and wear on him were clear as day... not that it was *bad*, of course. Rovest could confidently call him a silver fox were it not for the fact that he was a lion.

"Don't worry. I would've felt guilty if I made you wait anyway."

Taking a step forward, the scented smog hit him with an even more powerful array of smells. Having spent so long eating bland meals meant that his nose was attuned to the sheer simplicity of them. In contrast, the overwhelming number of spices that coated each and every serving gave punch after punch of whiplash.

"Oh, are you sick?" Ganfu asked with concern.

"No, it's just"—He harshly swallowed, adam's apple bobbing with a massive lump, as he leaned on the wall—"The scent is... a lot. Sensitive nose is all."

"Ah, I should've known. You'll get used to it eventually. A flavorful meal will bring you all the energy you need for training! I would know!" He let out a hearty laugh while patting his belly. It was just like hearing a baton slam against a tight orchestral drum. "Today, I'll be introducing you to the art of sustenance!"

"You're saying that eating is an art?" With how much Ganfu put into every bite and slurp, it might as well have been. "Is that why you're..."

"Well built? Of course!" Dropping the spoon into the bowl of soup, Ganfu turned to the side and flexed his exposed arms. Muscle underneath pulsed across the layers of fat wrapped around the limb. "And you'll be there too! As long as you follow the training regime, of course."

"I just can't believe that eating that much is part of the training..."

"Bulk is what allows me to move with such celerity! And you'll be able to move that fast too. It's just a matter of practice." Taking a massive bite out of the barbeque sauce steak, he swallowed it as if it was liquid. "Mhm. Just like this!"

"Just like that." Rovest asked with wide eyes and an agape mouth. "Uh, I'd rather go with something a little bit more lowkey. I also ate before I went here since you always said to refuel my energy reserves..."

Ganfu clicked his chopsticks and scrunched up his face for a second. "It appears that my desire to surprise you left you in a small predicament. How full are you?"

"Uh, a little bit?" Giving his stomach a slight rub, Rovest could *palpably* feel the food inside. Ever since the training started, his meals had become an array of rations that were actually

decently sizeable—with that came a period of adjustment that his body was still getting used to. “I’m not so sure if I can eat something that big, though. I’d probably puke it all out.”

“Ah, I remember when Gregory was just like you. Poor lad could barely manage to find space for seconds.” Ganfu scratched his mane as he reminisced. His eyes closed and lips curved into a warm, weathered smile. “It’s perfectly fine if you can’t eat that much. The only thing I ask of you is to observe and learn.”

“Learn how to eat, you mean?”

“Indeed.” Ganfu moved his chopsticks over the bowl of steaming dumplings and popped one into his mouth. “Eating is just not a natural process. It’s like laying on a field of flowers or being in a hot spring. It’s a joyous part of life.”

“I was supposed to enjoy it?” Well, that binge of greasy but *bland* fast food earlier in the day was making him feel real stupid. He knew that Ganfu ate a lot, sure. It just didn’t seem feasible for the overindulgence to end up in a pleasing manner—quantity over quality. “I thought it was like... working out. Something you did to better yourself, but it isn’t exactly fun.”

“It *can* be fun! Just join me here.” Ganfu rubbed the spot beside him. “I’ll give you a run-through on how I *roll*.”

Placing his hand above his smirk, Rovest walked around the giant array of plates and placed himself to Ganfu’s right. Now that he was so close and without the risk of being slammed into the training mat, the lion’s size was all the more apparent. He knew that it was rude to stare, but all the curves and rolls were captivating. A body like Ganfu’s was a sight that he had never marveled at before.

With the way he ate, it was easy to put two and two together.

“Do you know what my favorite part of eating is?”

Rovest didn’t really know what to say. So many things that Ganfu inspired him to do—the number of choices was overwhelming. Be it luck or the lion’s senses being attuned, Ganfu clicked his tongue at his silence.

“It’s the knowledge that I’m getting stronger. Bigger too!”

Ganfu picked up another dumpling. He tenderly lowered it to Rovest’s hand before picking up another for himself. After seeing the dumpling going into Ganfu’s mouth easily, Rovest never would’ve expected it to be so... *large*. It filled out both of his palms, not to mention the surprising amount of *heft* to it.

“Where do I... start with this? I think that I should use a fork and knife for this.”

“Not at all! Come on now, just try.”

Rovest's hands trembled. Last thing he wanted was to make a mess on the pristine mat, but with Ganfu tenderly looking at him, he couldn't refuse—even more when his large paws were on him. He could barely manage to breathe properly.

He bit deep into the dumpling; meat, lettuce, chicken, curry, and potatoes were one of the many things that he tasted with one single bite. He couldn't even breathe before he felt compelled to take another morsel—then another—and more—more—*more*. The cafeteria food that he foolishly believed to be anything of quality looked like nothing in retrospect.

“And here I thought that you weren't hungry.” Ganfu cooed, tenderly moving his paw from Rovest's shoulder. “Let's continue, alright? Nice and slow.”

“Yes, sir!” He said with a mouth full of food. “Can you give me some chopsticks?”

“Of course! And they're not any old chopsticks...” From the chest pocket sewn into his yukata, Ganfu took out an ornate-looking blue box; a series of golden carvings on the lid with a red gem in the center. “Take it as a token of gratitude. As my new pupil.”

The box felt unnatural in his hands. To hold something so precious was like touching something from a world that wasn't his own. Looking back at his new master, Rovest couldn't really bring himself to break the hesitance in him. He had yet to achieve *worthiness*.

“Come on, you'll like what's inside.” Taking the lead for himself, Ganfu opened the box and allowed Rovest to gaze inside.

The chopsticks were nothing like the ones Ganfu had; same color as the box with matching carvings—each time that they pressed together earning a pleasant clink.

“Woah...”

“Beautiful, is it not? Come on now... Lets' eat!”

And like a snowball rolling down a hill, something minute began blooming indescribable. Ganfu was gracious enough to slow his pace and allow Rovest to match it, moving in unison—like two beings at once as they delighted in all that was in front of them. It was less of an activity and more like... *a ritual*. It eased and calmed the still-existing pressure inside the bunny's stomach. Like a strong current running through a flat, calm lake without any destruction or tear to what was around it.

Platters of sushi and sashimi—giant bowls overflowing with tempura shrimp and a smaller soy sauce bowl to accompany it—an array of meat skewers coated in sesame seeds and barbeque sauce—Fried dough balls filled to the brim with fried octopus—and a giant cauldron of ramen right on the center; those were just a sample of all that Ganfu had prepared for tonight.

“You're doing great.” Ganfu cooed in a low, rumbling voice. “How do you feel?”

“I'm... *managing*.” Rovest tried his hardest to continue the rhythm he had reached—all while Ganfu stared intently at him. It was impossible for the bunny to know exactly what the lion was

thinking; was he impressed? Was Rovest performing as expected? Was he disappointed? He didn't know. Bit by bit, he made sure that no more space was left. Limits he used to believe in were nothing in the face of encouragement. "Although I don't know if I can eat much more..."

"No worries. After all, any kind of art takes time to master. Is that not true?"

"But—"

"No buts. If you're done, then it makes sense to stop." He gently took the chopsticks off Rovest's hands. "Lean back against the wall for support. Make sure to breathe evenly and slowly. Deep breaths. In and out."

"A-alright. Thanks, sir." As soon as the euphoria of eating faded away, the fullness hit him in the face at full power. An overwhelming warmth that pulsed with each second turned his breathing jagged and sweating excessive. "Damn. I've never eaten so much in my life, but I don't feel like I'm going to puke either?"

"That means that you're getting better at this. Those gorges of yours helped." Ganfu scooted up to Rovest. "Do you need anything? Water, or anything of the sort?"

"Belly rubs." Rovest placed his hand over his mouth. Did he just say that? He did, but it didn't *feel* real. He kept questioning himself. "I-I mean, well, I'm kidding! I don't need them. I think that I'm actually going to go home!" He tried standing up, but like the earth itself was pulling him down, he headed to the floor. "Ngh!"

"Oh my, be careful!" Ganfu managed to catch Rovest in the nick of time. His breathing had turned heavy for the first time. Everything raced for a second—the world spinning until it took a hard stop at this very moment. "Are you... okay?"

Rovest gazed back at Ganfu with wide eyes. He kept his hand close to his chest—hearing every individual beat reverberate across his head. "I think so." Despite the short response, he had never sounded more unsure in his life.

"Alright." Without another word, he pushed up Rovest's shirt. The brown-furred belly was taut and hard. "Now, how about we relax?"

"I—" Rovest bit his tongue. He wanted to protest. Worthiness hadn't reached him, but maybe, he could indulge himself *just this once*. "Yeah. That'd be nice."