

Chapter 6: Breathe Hare Breathe

The inside of the studio was a sight taken straight out of Rovest's dreams. How many times had he rewatched that backstage tour of Ganfu's movies? It had to be at least in the hundreds because he recognized almost *all* of the equipment used in those movies as it was laid out around the studio. Even if Ganfu's words about his strength lingered in the back of his mind, the sheer thrill of being here helped him stay upbeat.

Gregory—still sweating bullets—pulled up his overstuffed clipboard as he read aloud the chicken scratch he had for notes. "Alright, bossman said we needed to be here around 4:00 pm. We're running five minutes late since Ganfu lives in the middle of fucking *nowhere*—"

"Not my fault that the waterfalls are so far away from the city," Ganfu interjected.

"—but it's okay! We'll just be on the very bottom of the line. As long as *you*"—he pointed his fat digit at Rovest, who recoiled back in return—"don't mess up and follow Ganfu's training. They're going to test out how much of a beating you can take, so you gotta make sure you fall correctly and all that jazz the old man taught you, alright?"

"Of course, of course." Still, it was hard to maintain a strong resolve when surrounded by clearly more qualified applicants. Muscular, tall animals sparring with each other made him look at his own pudgy frame in shame. There was undeniable muscle underneath, but it was utterly invisible to anyone. He probably looked no different than any other overweight movie nerd.

"Cold feet, Rovest?" Ganfu gently placed his hand on the hare's shoulder. "No worries. I'm sure that you'll do splendidly."

"But, everyone else— "

"They look stronger, yes, but do they have your resistance? Your resolve?"

Ganfu's speech sounded taken straight out of one of his movies—the Zentai ones, especially. He'd come in cameo appearances as the White Panda ranger and heroically ramble on and on. It was hard to tell if he was putting on another show or if his motivational speeches were always *that* bombastic.

Still, that wasn't enough to shake the doubt off his being. "Not just that, but..." *Am I... not big enough?* Perhaps it was paranoia, but it could also be intuition; Ganfu knew something and he wasn't telling him. There was something clearly clawing at the lion's thought, but it was impossible to know what exactly.

"But... what, Rovest? What is it that's weighing on you so heavily?"

Rovest swallowed harshly. How was he supposed to confront his idol like that? *'Hey, Ganfu. Do you trust me or not? Not big enough for ya?'*; just thinking about it made him feel queasy—the *worst* way to feel right before a performance. He rubbed circles around his stomach, trying to soothe the churning inside.

“It’s just something silly. I think that I’ll be okay.”

“Promise?” Ganfu asked—gently gripping Rovest’s shoulder, as if he was afraid that the would go running at any moment. “If you need to tell me anything, never hesitate to ask. Okay?”

“Will do, Ganfu...”

“Everyone!”

The pair turned their heads at a rat clad in shaggy clothes holding a megaphone. “The tryouts will begin in three hours! Make sure you’re dressed in your suits, mask on, and makeup on! We’re gonna try out an action scene, so make sure that you’re high on energy! You’ll have your own green rooms, so no excuses!”

“Whaddaya wanna do, Rovest? We have some time to relax.”

Without hesitation, Rovest nodded. “I... I wanna look at our green room if that’s okay with you.”

“Then we shall do just that.”

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Rovest wasn’t used to wearing costumes. The fey plays and short movies he had starred in—most of them either in his local theater or as a favor for friends—never required anything of him but plain, casual clothes. The extravagant attires that hung from the clothing line reflected the vanity’s light with their shiny, glossy material. He felt like a kid, perusing the Halloween costumes section of the shopping center and wishing that he could wear all of them. Of course, the caveat was that he was the average size of a hare back then. Now—rotund and weighing in around two hundred and ninety pounds—he felt like a whale blundering through a beach. He felt so *massive*, and yet at the same time, he felt so small whenever he thought about Ganfu.

Fortunately for him, the lion and Gregory had noticed his building anxiety and left him alone to not worsen it.

He tried matching the lion’s boisterous eating habits. To consume not as a bodily necessity but a simple pleasure, yet he would always give out under the pressure built inside his stomach once too many calories were scarfed down. The paradoxical spiral about his size never ceased; always on the back of his mind, tugging at his conscience.

The sight of Ganfu eating away without a care of the world was like a panacea to his worries, but that was only temporary. As the clock ticked towards his impending embarrassment in the audition, his mind raced. Gregory had taken some of Ganfu’s old posters as some sort of motivational imagery plastered across the green room to hype him up. Taking a glance over the audition posters, the inconsistencies between what he wanted and how he looked like twisting his stomach into a knot.

Sighing in resignation, he was about to retrieve the red Zentai suit to put it on when he realized that something was sticking out from the vanity's drawer. A stray, brown piece of paper clearly belonging to a manila envelope.

This is what was sticking out of the folder...

Rovest pulled the drawer and retrieved the contents inside, all the while he ensured the door was locked behind him. *Yeong and Wahta—Heroes In Service*. It was an outline for the very movie he was about to audition for. He had gotten the essential details from Gregory, but certainly nothing to this extent.

He was going to play the role of Wahta; a young apprentice to the main character Yeong. He was clumsy, anxious and struggled through the entire movie until the final act. The words 'punching bag' were written on red marker across one of the pages, and Rovest was beginning to understand why Gregory seemed so convinced that he was perfect for the role. On a pure technicality, he could endure all the action scenes that the directors wanted to throw at him, but it didn't make him feel any better about his growing doubts.

Turning the page over, he saw the page for Yeong; the standard cool Zentai hero. Rovest's eyes immediately widened as he realized how the supposed 'main hero' looked. Instead of the muscular build that the industry loved, it was... the spitting image of Ganfu. The lion in the picture was a little smaller than the Ganfu Rovest knew, but that didn't mean he was small by any means. The tight suit wrapped around his curves tightly, making all the rolls and extra padding stand out all the stronger. A pair of man boobs rested atop the giant ball of a gut he had, the lion's nipples pushing against the stretchy latex.

"Woah..." His cheeks immediately reddened as the sight enraptured his mind. He couldn't stop himself from staring. With the yukata, even if Ganfu's thunder thighs, tree trunk legs, beefy arms, and a *little bit* of his chest were exposed, his belly and ass were hidden from view. Rovest had certainly found himself fantasizing about seeing a bare Ganfu ever since he started his apprenticeship under the lion, but he never thought that he could see something like this. "Is Ganfu really...?"

Leaning in further, it was clear that despite all the similarities between Ganfu and the obese lion in the pictures, it was someone else. The photos were taken in the modern day, yet the lion pictured in the folder was at least twenty years younger than Ganfu. He lacked that rugged, weathered look that made Ganfu so attractive in the first place. "So who is this?" Turning to the next page, Rovest finally found a name. "...The Great Guang?"

Before he could read further into the folder, the sound of the door unlocking pierced Rovest's ears. Without thinking, he shoved the manila envelope back into the drawer and slammed it shut.

"Rovest?"

Ganfu's voice echoed through the green room as he pushed himself inside. The lion struggled to squeeze himself through the doorway, his massive ball gut squeezed through the narrow opening with all his might. The round dome of flab morphed against the strain, changing shape like a giant piece of soft clay.

"Yes, Master Ganfu?"

"Sorry, just... give me a second." The lion growled as he continued his efforts. The front of his stomach pushed through, jiggling as all the built-up force *burst* out of it once it moved past the threshold. Now his thighs were pressing against the doorway, still stuck. "Do you mind giving me some help!"

"Of course! S-sorry, I was just... busy." Standing up, Rovest saw that Ganfu was holding a large plastic container. "Do I grab that for you?"

"If you please."

The container was heavy, a thick liquid sloshing inside. Setting it down on the vanity, he moved to pull on Ganfu's arms. It was like pulling on a giant boulder with chains. The floor shook with each stomp that Ganfu took, sweat traveling down the lion's sides from the intense struggle. Rovest could feel his muscles straining as he put his all into trying to drag the *mountain* that was Ganfu.

"Hooooogh! Come on!" Rovest whined, arching his head back, veins popping across his thick arms. "Just... about to..."

Ganfu came out with a loud pop. The lion flew across the room, falling on top of Rovest and burying the hare underneath his flab. He could feel the small herbivore struggling underneath his belly, but the impact of the fall grounded him for an *agonizingly* long series of seconds, pain rippling through his body even in spite of the extra fatty padding protecting them.

"Ngh..." Rovest whined, his moans muffled by Ganfu's midsection pushing against his mouth. "Master Ganfu? Are you okay?"

"Yes... Just a little startled. You definitely surprised me with how strong you've gotten." Ganfu laughed through the stinging pain from the impact. Lifting himself up by his arms, he gazed down at Rovest—soaked from his sweat and with his cheeks an intense red. "You doing okay, Rovest?" He asked, a mix of concern and playfulness present in his voice.

"I'm doing good," Rovest said through nervous giggles. "What about you, Master Rovest? Are you doing okay?"

"As long as my student is okay, I'll be fine." Ganfu wiped away the dust spread across his yukata, his deep chuckle rumbling across Rovest's ears. "Are you sure you're feeling well *mentally*? You were taking quite a long time. Most of the other auditionees are already dressed and out there."

Rovest looked down at his feet, a pang of shame churning through his entire body. “It’s just that I’m not so sure if I’d be able to pull it off. I know I can do the action scenes perfectly—I’m confident of it!”

“Then what is troubling you?”

Rovest placed his hands underneath the pouch of fat Ganfu had been carefully cultivating through their mentorship together. “I’m just afraid that I won’t be taken seriously! You’re fat, but you’re also massive and strong. Everyone knows of your presence when you enter a room, meanwhile, I just feel like a useless tubby fool.”

“Rovest... What are you talking about? You’re a masterful warrior! You’re the best student I’ve had in years. Those who can afford to take a hundred blows are the true masters of their bodies, not the ones that hone them just to show off.”

“I *know* that, Master Ganfu. The problem is that most other people don’t.” Rovest lamented, slumping into the vanity seat. “I’m not as big as you, so of course people won’t take me seriously.”

“Oh, Rovest...”

“I’m not quitting. Not now that I’ve come this far.” The hare’s palms were sweaty, each finger trembling as the stage fright seeped deeper and deeper into the pile of self-doubt growing in his mind. “But it’s so hard. There are so many expectations to live up to. It’s a terrible thing to experience... Something you love coming with so many sharp caveats.”

“Like a prickly rose,” Ganfu mumbled under his breath. “But Rovest, trust me. I believe you can do it.”

“Can I? What if I mess up and it was all for nothing...”

“Yes.” He said firmly. “And if a vote of confidence you need, I can give you one.”

“How so—”

Rovest felt the world disappear. Words stopped—thoughts ceased, the only thing he could hear was his own breathing and the sound of the fluorescent vanity lights humming slightly behind him. Even through the almost silent atmosphere, the air felt *electric*; crackling with the adrenaline oozing out of his pores as the realization that Ganfu’s lips were pressed against his forehead. They were slightly dry, but somehow still soft. His body smelled like a mix of cologne and earned musk from hard work. The scent was *intoxicating*.

“Make me proud, Rovest.”