

## Chapter 5: Apotheosis For Dummies

Rovest closed his eyes. He tried steadying his breathing and follow the lion's teachings in the short span before he hit the ground. Every moment was worth *everything*, and he needed to slow his thoughts to make the most of it. It was like the world at large was in slow motion; sluggish, hard to maneuver around, *incomprehensible*.

*Feel like your body is water. Move effortlessly. Divert the pain away with your mind. Face it head-on, but do not think of yourself as invincible. Just like everything on planet Earth, the plants—the insects—the ground, you're mortal and vulnerable.*

He bolstered his posture to ensure the impact would spread across his body, not just a single pressure point. With a deep breath, he waited for a second to pass. Then, when the time arrived, Rovest opened his eyes.

### WHAM

It was painful. The pain spread like fire, but for some reason, it felt oddly... fulfilling? It was like the burn that followed an intense workout. The ache was almost like a trophy—something he could be proud of. Especially so, because he felt like he could easily stand up through the pain as soon as he opened his eyes.

"Jeez... I still can't believe how strong you are, Mister Ganfu." He said while rubbing his back.

"You're becoming strong yourself, young one," Ganfu said. "My training regime can make anyone a formidable warrior, but you've certainly excelled compared to..." He paused for a second before continuing as if nothing happened. "...my previous students."

Rovest's interest was suddenly piqued. He wasn't one to be nosy—not as much as Gregory could be at least—but at the same time, he couldn't help it. Despite how incredibly accommodating and welcoming Ganfu could be, there wasn't much known about him beyond his professional life. With that bait unintentionally thrown in his direction, there wasn't much he could do but ponder about it.

"How were your previous students like?"

In response, Ganfu placed his paw on Rovest's shoulder.

"That's a tale for another day, Rovest. For now, let's stretch before ending our training, shall we?"

His grip managed was slightly harder than usual. It was impossible to not feel the tension usually only present in combat in that grip, which only offset the pleasant ambiance that was present just one second ago.

"Yeah, sure."

Now with the two of them stretching on top of the training mats, Gregory pushed past the doors as he lumbered into the dojo with the grace of a drunken sailor. Heaving, covered in

sweat, and with his hands on his knees, it was impossible for him to look somewhat decent. Rovest tried hiding the snort that was coming up his throat, but he wasn't that successful at it.

"What bothers you? You look... worse for wear." Ganfu said while stroking his chin. "Are you hydra—"

"*Fuck* hydration! There are more important things right now!" Digging through an oversized travel backpack, Gregory threw knickknacks and folders behind him with wild abandon. The sheer messiness of the act almost made Ganfu speak up, but right before he could, Gregory screamed. "YES! I got it!"

"Got... what, exactly?" Ganfu asked, confused at the even more than usual hyperactiveness from Gregory.

"See for yourself! Catch!"

Ganfu managed to catch the folder with his eyes closed, but for all of his stoicism, even the shifu seemed unable to maintain his composure when he laid eyes on what was inside. His fur stood up like electricity surged through his body, eyes wide and jaw dropped.

"W-what is this?" Ganfu said through a gasp. "Are you sure that you have the right papers? This doesn't seem like it should be possible..."

"Unless you want to tell me that my mailman has been sending me fake mail for five years straight, it's the real deal! And we gotta get there A.S.A.P!" Gregory said, clapping his hands for each letter of the word. "Now, we gotta get moving! Ganfu, you go on the very back. Your fat ass isn't going to fit n the front seats of the van."

"You didn't need tell that..." He said with a huff. Walking past Gregory, he made sure to deliver a swift strike to the back of the red panda's head for such transgression. "Make sure to get yourself ready, Rovest!"

All the while, Rovest had remained completely silent. The volume of the conversation was as tempestuous as standing right beside the waterfall near the temple. He didn't know if he was supposed to be fearful, excited, or some odd combination of both.

Well—considering that Gregory was slamming his paw into the car horn like a madman—it wasn't like he could refute. Scrambling to put on his sandals, Rovest ran out of the dojo and into the car.

"Everyone ready?" Gregory asked.

"Wait, I actually have to buckle my be—"

"Okay GOGOGO!" The red panda screamed as he pressed down on the gas. "WOOOO!"

Both he and Ganfu held on to the car handles next to their respective spots for dear life. Rovest could feel his heartbeat through his eardrums, the fear of road rage plunging anxiety

deep into his heart, and with Gregory taking turns in a display of immature irreverence, he needed something to take his mind off his possible imminent car crash *now*.

"W-what was in that fold-CHRIST!" Rovest felt his heart *almost* come up his throat when the van rushed through a hole in the road. "C-careful, Gregory! We're going to get hurt at this rate, or something even worse!"

"Nah, you're going to be a-okay!" Gregory reassured with too much confidence for it to feel genuine or safe. "I've been chauffeuring Ganfu ever since they cut my contract, and he never had any *permanent* injuries!"

"Not everyone is as durable as me, Gregory..." Ganfu made sure to remind him with a cadence authoritative enough to match the one of a disappointed parent. "Especially someone as small as Rovest!"

"Excuse me, *permanent*?! And not just that," —he jerked his head towards Ganfu—"but I'm not *that* small! I've hehe making sure to bulk up, just as you've told me to do!"

"I understand, but"—the massive lion slid to the other side of the van as Gregory did a sharp turn, the thud on impact so massive it caused even the madman red panda behind the wheel to look back in concern—"you must know that it's always important to remain humble. Size is power—power only fosters if controlled and nurtured, just like a plant."

"I-I guess..."

The two trains of thought in his head were rushing past each other—on the verge of crashing as the conflict between them grew. Rovest couldn't put his finger on it—there was just something off about how he felt about all the extra padding around his formerly slender body. Most other people would've already thrown in the towel by now; no visible muscle gain in two months was enough to drive most people out of overpriced gym memberships—then again, Ganfu was no ordinary trainer.

No matter how embarrassing, Rovest could not resist reminiscing about the time Ganfu intimately rubbed his stomach. He was more tender than anyone else in his life. Not just that, but being so close to the man he had idolized felt like a dream. Ganfu's stomach was just like a pillow greeting him in bed after a long day of work. It felt like... home.

*People in my class have been staring at me weirdly... but then, Ganfu makes it feel like it works. I don't feel lethargic. I feel happy, in fact!*

Even beyond physical contact, Ganfu still remained an overwhelming presence in his mind. The way he spoke made Rovest feel like he was the most important person in the world. There was a gleam in those azure eyes that had been missing from the bunny's life—a gleam that never failed to keep him awake whenever he thought about it under the cover of night.

*I've always had a crush on him. Is what I'm seeing really there?* He never experienced actual heartbreak firsthand. Ganfu was the only person that he had been so intensely

attracted—even before actually meeting him. *Are my expectations all wrong? I don't want to make Ganfu uncomfortable...*

“Are you okay, Rovest?”

Ganfu's deep voice broke Rovest out of his daydreaming. Concern was written all over his face, brows arched up and lips scrunched up for an expression that looked wholly unfitting on someone so strong.

“Yeah, Mister Ganfu.” Rovest could feel his chest tightening. *Someone like him is probably beyond the realms of romance. “I think... I'm fine.” But as long as he cares about me, I think I'll be fine...*

As if he could feel the tension in the air, Gregory's fiery driving piped down. For the rest of the ride, it was... uneventful.

*I... Never did learn what was in that folder...*

But of course, as the giant sign of the movie studio—spelling out in bright neon letters ‘TRIGGER MOVIE PRODUCTIONS’ across the twilight sky—Rovest's doubts buried themselves.

It was showtime.