**Prologue: Reach For The Sky**

Whenever someone’s asked what they want to be when they grow up, the answer is something idealized and unobtainable; a firefighter, an astronaut, or in this case, a famous movie star. Usually, that dream goes away by the time adulthood comes knocking. It’s simply easier to give it up—discard it and only think of it as something whimsical concocted by youthful ignorance.

Rovest wasn’t one of those people. Ever since he was small, he had longed for stardom. Whether it was a high school play or a performance his local drama club had, he was eager to be showered with accolades. His dream of being a famous actor was something that he adamantly refused to let go of, but clutching to those dreams came at a price; the creeping, all-consuming fear that he might not be cut out for this line of work. If his utter lack of success at age twenty-seven was anything to go by, the fright was certainly justified.

Every day was the same; go back to his college dorm after classes for a degree he wasn’t all that interested in, check if any of his auditions or Creeklist ads had gotten any traction, and then be met with a blank screen and no notifications.

Today, he was expecting it to go the same way. Holding out hope was a task that got harder with each week that passed with no results. Motivation was a precious resource—a resource that he was bleeding more and more with each lost opportunity that passed by him.

Locking the door behind him, the sorry sight of his room only drives the knife deeper into the wound; dirty clothes littering the floor, a dim light bulb that was on its last leg, and nothing but a bed without covers since his only pair were currently in the laundromat. The only thing that didn’t make him feel ashamed of the state of his apartment was his pride and joy; a massive collection of kung fu movies neatly arranged on a shelf that he maintained with absolute perfection.

He just pushed past it—he’d get to it *eventually*—and turned on the computer. He was expecting the bitter but familiar taste of disappointment.

Yet when he saw that beautiful green notification over the bell icon, all of the grief that had been piling up for months suddenly disappeared. Before even reading what the client wanted him to do, Rovest clicked on it.

Little did he know that it was the domino that would eventually headstart a brand new direction.

**Chapter 1: Scent of meat. Sound of oil. Taste of success.**

When he saw who the user who hired him was, Rovest was sure that he was going to *faint*. He was already excited about the gig since it involved martial arts. All the knowledge about the genre he had built over the years was about to become useful at last—and it *did* end up being useful in the interview in a roundabout way.

“Earth to ‘what’s your name’? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I’m so sorry, Mister Eastwood! It’s just that I never thought that I would meet a cast member from one of my favorite movie franchises!” He could barely keep his excitement contained. The animals that lttered the cafeteria desks were all looking at him with judging, skeptical eyes.

“What’s all this ‘Mistuh Eastwood’ nonsense? You can just call me Gregory.”

“Right. Yeah. It wasn’t my intention to offend you.” His palms were sweaty. His chest was tight. Everything was spinning, and he was making an ass of himself in front of the man that played one of his favorite childhood idols. At this rate, he was silently hoping for the earth to swallow him.

“Eh. I don’t care about it. I just want you to know that there’s no need to treat me like a movie star. Now I’m just a manager, so no need to act like I’m hot stuff..”

“I see…”

It just didn’t compute in Rovest’s mind. Gregory wasn’t *just* an actor to him. He played Wah-himbo in the Star Hero movies—the series that pretty much defined his childhood. Thinking of him as just some rando felt almost sacrilegious! How could he act normally in front of such a talented star!?

“Well, you said that you’re familiar with the genre, right?”

“Yes!” He practically screamed as the excitement burst out of him. “I’ve rewatched every single one of your movies! I even ranked you as the best sidekick in kung fu cinema history in my blog!”

“Oh, a fan of Wah-himbo? It’s rare to see your kind these days. Everyone keeps saying that it was a stereotype or some random junk like that.” Gregory said. “But you seem like you know your good kung fu movies. You know any martial arts, though?”

Rovest’s euphoria deflates like a punctured balloon as soon as Gregory drops the question. “You got me there. I’ve tried getting into some self-defense courses, but I never went past the white belt.”

“No need to make such a sour face! I didn’t expect you to be experienced with them. Not to worry, though. If you decide to work under me and my boss, we can shape you up into the best damn kung fu movie star that this world has ever seen!”

Without even hesitating, Rovest reached out to shake Gregory’s hand. This was it. Finally, an opportunity for him to reach his dream had arrived—accompanied by one of his childhood heroes no less! He was shaking vigorously—feet tapping against the ground and arms trembling as ideas of stardom filled his mind.

“Welcome aboard to my crew, Robert—”

“Rovest.” He quickly corrected.

“Yeah yeah yeah! Rovest, my boy. You’re just going to do great, believe me.” Gregory insisted. “You caught me at a good time, too. I was just about to leave to see my boss. Do you want me to introduce you to him?”

“Oh, I’d love that! I just have one question. Who’s your boss?”

“Did I forget to mention him? Man, I’m really out of my game lately!” Gregory smacked himself good two or three times rapidly before shaking his head and shooting a smile at Rovest. “Considering that you have the sidekick right here, I’m sure you can put two and two together.”

The realization hit him with the grace of a sledgehammer to the face. He was so excited to meet Gregory that it didn’t even occur to him that the red panda couldn’t be acting alone in this industry. It didn’t *feel* like it could be happening—that it was too good to be true. and he would wake up in his crappy, coverless bed if he leaned too deep into this fantasy, but still, he had to ask about the leading man in *dozens* of movies that pushed him to pursue his dream in the first place.

“Is… Mister Ganfu—”

“Duh! Old man and I are still working together like in the old days! Hell, just today, we actually sparred together because he *insists* that he can’t have his old sidekick—” But Gregory couldn’t even finish his sentence before Rovest practically lunged at him and held him by his suspenders.

“Please take me to Mister Ganfu!”

By now, Rovest felt like he could barely breathe. Meeting Gregory was amazing enough, but meeting *Ganfu*—the biggest kung fu star of the 90s that starred in more than thirty movies—was a long-life dream that he never thought would be possible. It was something he reserved for embarrassing rambles written in his teenage diaries and fanfiction that he should’ve deleted from his hard drive by now.

“Woah, woah! Hold your horses!” Gregory slowly pushed Rovest away as he chuckled at the young man’s overeagerness. “It’s gonna be a long way from here to the dojo. Probably an hour-long ride. Are you sure that you have your gas tank filled up?”

“Gas tank?”

“Your *stomach*.” He pushed his finger against Rovest’s stomach. “Damn, kid! You’re skin and bones. Are you sure that you’re eating your greens?”

“Well, sometimes I skip lunch…” Working on a software engineering major left him with little time to treat himself, not to mention that the cafeteria prices of his university were incredibly expensive. Without a car, going to get groceries would take too much time, so that option was out for him as well. “But I’m okay! Seriously.”

“Don’t give me any of that nonsense. If you’re going to perform well at your audition, you’re going to need some energy. It’s my treat.”

“Wait!”

Gregory either didn’t hear him or didn’t care for Rovest’s protests. Before he could say anything to the red panda, he was already ordering something from the cafeteria. He was striking up some conversation with the woman behind the counter—who was looking thoroughly uninterested in what he had to say.

He was lucky that he rarely went to the cafeteria. It was unbearably embarrassing to see Gregory try to charm a woman who was probably not even processing what was going on beyond writing down his order.

The time between Gregory ordering and getting the food felt eternal. Yet when the red panda arrived at the table, the shame was nothing to the sheer awe of the meal presented to him; a double-decker burger with french fries and three spicy chicken wings—the most expensive items on the menu that no one but the overweight rich boys of the school ordered.

“Is that all for me?” It *obviously* was. Rovest knew that. The sight was just so unnatural that he struggled to even imagine himself indulging in something like it. For *years*, he had been eating nothing but ramen and microwaved meals—the smallest sizes to boot.

“What, you’re one of those vegetarians?”

“No, it’s not that. it’s just that it’s the first time someone has ever bought food like this for me.” Ever since he moved out of his parent’s house, eating had gone from an intimate pleasure to something he did automatically without savoring it—not that there was too much to savor with the drab and plain state of the ramen he bought in bulk. “And what about you?”

“Me? Not to worry, lad.” Gregory lifted his hand into the air before slapping it against his firm ball gut. The sound was just like slapping a tight, old drum. “I always get my fill before going to work! A hungry worker is a bad worker!”

“I… Okay, okay.” Reluctantly, he sat down and took a bite. With the burger in his hands, he stretched his mouth as far as he could—even if it was painful to try and get as many layers inside his mouth. The instant that the food hit his tongue, he gripped the hamburger from the sheer punch the burger packed. It had felt like an *eternity* since a meal made him feel that way. “Oh, I’m so sorry for the bad manners. It’s just that-oh, my god. I’m so sorry.”

Gregory burst out laughing at the torrent of apologies that spilled out of Rovest’s mouth. “Just eat already, man! I need you energized, so less yapping and more chomping!”

Dutifully, Rovest did as told.

**Chapter 2: Overture To Adventure (And A Full Stomach)**

The drive was slow. *Excruciatingly so*. There was nothing to do but stare into a forever-stretching bamboo forest. The signal had died out a long time ago. With the fairly *pathetic* amount of storage that it had, he couldn’t have downloaded any game apps on his phone.

The thick foliage and the towering bamboo attached to it cast shadows over the barely maintained road. Cracks and holes littered it—the feeling of driving over it was what Rovest assumed driving over a minefield felt like. Gregory was skilled enough to avoid the hazards, but that still didn’t help to soothe his anxiety. He gripped the assist handle like his life depended on it. Considering the depth of the holes in the road, maybe it *did* depend on it.

Of course, he could’ve asked Gregory, but he wasn’t about to ask for another person’s phone during a car ride like a bored Ipad kid. The only thing that he could’ve done through the entire duration of the trip was count the bamboo trees in the distance, lose count, and then start all over again.

“Are you bored there?” Gregory asked.

“A little.” Understatement of the century, but he wasn’t about to act snappy at his employer as of two hours ago. “How long do we have until we arrive?”

He scratched the small twinge of fur beard that hung below his chin. “I’d say that we’re about… three seconds from the place.

“Wait, *what*?”

Just as the conversation shifted, they finally escaped the trail of the trees’ shadows, and the view of their destination showed itself. A massive, almost mansion-like temple was seen in the distance. Grand, expansive gardens surrounded the perimeter of the temple—lush flora as far as the eye can see and what appeared to be beautifully crafted patterns on the many zen gardens.

“Holy…”

“Yeah. What a beauty, right?” Gregory chuckled. “I keep it all pretty for Ganfu. The old man’s really antsy about having everything nice and clean.” He made sure to drive slowly so that Rovest could get a good look at the entire temple.

The parking went smoothly—a completely flat and smooth path amidst the stone tiles that were seemingly made exclusively for Gregory.

A cold, peaceful breeze washed over Rovest. The temple seemed even more beautiful up close. He recognized the temple as an heirloom from Ganfu’s family, but despite its age, it didn’t show any kind of weathering. It looked like it was taken straight out of those hundreds-year-old pictures that were part of his martial artists-themed collection.

“I wonder what he’ll think of me…” Rovest wondered out loud.

“Ganfu’s a softie when it comes to youngins like you. He’s only a hardass to me because I’m his sidekick.” Gregory snickered.

“I thought that I told you not to use that vocabulary, Gregory.”

The deep, gruff voice suddenly came from behind them. Rovest saw Gregory turn as still as stone the second that he heard those words. His hands rose into the air and his fluffy tail frazzled outwards.

“Fucking hell, Ganfu! You know that I hate when you just come in like that from nowhere!”

As soon as the name parted Gregory’s lips, Rovest felt his heartrate skyrocket. He turned around, and there he was; the man that had contributed to his gay awakening and his main fixation for years.

Ganfu was a *mountain* of a man. His body could barely be contained by the thin yukata he was adorned in. To say that the man had changed from how he looked would be putting it lightly; his legs were as wide as tree trunks, his arms were so chunky that fat visibly hung off from them, and most notably, his white furred belly was proudly displayed through the yukata’s poor attempt at hiding it.

Not to mention that nothing but the upper part of his thigh was being covered. With the strong winds passing through the high-altitude mountain, Rovest was sure that if he focused enough he could get a peek at the lion’s undergarments.

*I can’t see it clinging to his legs. Is he wearing one of those fundoshis?! I thought that people didn’t wear them anymore…*

“And *I* believe I told you that such language wasn’t appreciated in my dojo.” Ganfu huffed before changing his focus toward Rovest. “I assume that Gregory managed to get you interested in our proposition?”

“Yeah. You guys wanted to go for a new kung fu movie, right? A new franchise that’s being funded by a rising movie studio. Something about… Vigilantes, I think?” He was more of a fan of heroes who went solo. Being movie savvy, he knew that the presence of teammates and extra characters was more often than not related to pumping out merchandise.

“Correct. The Council of Justice is an adaptation of an old comic book. I’m a big fan, and with the experience of my career on my belt, I managed to become a character consultant while Gregory over here became the casting director.” Ganfu explained. “Do you know what role you’ll be playing?”

“I remember the name, but I don’t know anything else.” He was in such a rush to accept Gregory’s deal that he didn’t even bother looking up the property he was going to play a role in—let alone the *character*. “His name was Captain Beryl , I think? I remember seeing the word sidekick on his character description too…”

“He’s one of the most iconic sidekicks in comic history!” Gregory exclaimed. “They’re thinking of redesigning him since this is a reboot, but Ganfu is one hundred percent against it!”

“Captain Beryl’s core as a character revolves around being a sidekick. His growth as a person from a follower to a stand lone hero is important. As a teacher, his growth was inspiring to see, so to see them try to retool him into a bastardized version of himself…” Ganfu crossed his arms. The scowl on his face made his disdain for the new direction clear as day. “So, I proposed that if I bought a star that could act out the role of the original Beryl’s character, they wouldn’t change it.”

“Oh.”

Rovest turned stiff at the explanation. He expected the gig to be high caliber, but he wasn’t exactly thinking about being the decisive factor if a movie kept its artistic integrity. Disputes about scriptwriting were completely foreign to him—being a doormat of a person made it easier to get along with everyone on set, after all.

But what other choice did he have? Going back to a life of monotony and boredom—staring at a computer screen all day long while writing code that he felt no passion for—and spending the rest of his days by the motto of utter mediocrity?

“What would I need to… get ready for the role?” The anxiety kept creeping up, but he was more than ready to push it down by sheer force or will. Although, bottling it up would perhaps be a better choice of words, because the load suddenly thrust into his shoulders certainly didn’t feel any lighter even after he solidified his resolve. “I promise that I’ll give it my all, so just tell me what I need to do!”

“See, Ganfu? I pick my actors well.” Gregory boasted.

“We’ll see.” Ganfu rubbed his old, graying mane. “I’ll be the judge of your character. From the looks of it, you don’t look that strong.”

“Is it really *that* obvious?” Rovest asked frustratedly.

“The sight knows. Simple as that.” Gregory snickered. He placed his palm over his mouth as soon as Rovest turned to glare at him. “B-but Ganfu can get you into shape in a jiffy! You just gotta make sure that you stick to his training regime!”

“Training regime?”

A good look at Ganfu didn’t exactly inspire hope. That giant gut and the flab that wrapped around the old lion’s limb were… concerning. It was a mystery as to how a man so impossibly large managed to get out of bed. He didn’t comment on it or even wanted to ponder about it—he was his childhood hero after all—but the fact that he was massive was undeniable.

*He has to be at least five hundred pounds, and I’m probably greatly underestimating how heavy he is…*

Gantu seemingly spotted Rovest’s skepticism. “Are you perhaps questioning if I’m fit to teach?”

“Not at all, sir!” Rovest said. Unfortunately, his pitifully shaky voice made it impossible to hide his distrust.

The lion scoffed. He squatted down before suddenly leaping into the air. Time froze as the massive lion soared into the air—Rovest finally getting a glimpse at the underside of his yukata and causing his face to turn entirely red—before he landed right behind the hare. The titanic impact caused the stone tiles that cushioned his landing to crack into pieces. They were basically unrepairable—shattered into so many fragments that they didn’t resemble their original self.

Ganfu stood motionless before bending down to pick up the pieces of the tiles, scooping them up in his hands, and pushing them into a trash bin made out of clay.

“Do you have any classes, young one?” He asked. His back was bent forward to be at Rovest’s eye level. His face remained unchanged from before he jumped.

“No.”

The hot air from Gantu’s nostrils was falling directly into his face. The size of the man was even more indescribable upfront. Rovest couldn’t fully believe that he was staring at someone in real life. Everything about the man—body—spirit—mind—demeanor—was like it was taken out of one of his many childhood dreams of superheroes with uncomfortably tight spandex.

“Excellent. Then follow me.” He said as he turned around. “We have a gi of your size in storage. Your training will commence in ten minutes.”

“Wait, *now?* Don’t I need to get an explanation of how everything is going to work? Like, a seminar or something?”

“Christ. You really are from a fancy university, aren’t you?” Gregory said—hand against the face. “Ganfu’s old school. Nothing like those baby extracurricular karate courses that are so common these days.”

“Now, just because they are poor quality doesn’t mean that we should condemn them. They’re probably spreading themselves thin with so many students and poor funding.” Ganfu finished his sentence with a stomp. Then, he walked to the dojo without any other words left.

Gregory came behind Rovest and pressed his paw on his shoulder. “Now, like I told you in the car, you gotta give it your all. No pussying out. You can take breaks if you want, but don’t straight up quit. ”

“I… I see.” Rovest gulped down and moved into the dojo. With his hand on his chest, he could feel his ribcage reverberating against the beat of his exasperated heart. “Well, I guess that I’ll start now.”