

“Practice Makes Perfect”

Ms. Jessica walks up to a desk in the second row, fourth column next to the window which sat a boy with black hair, wearing a blue t-shirt, blue tight jeans, and dozing off in class. Her eye twitches, she crosses her arms, and she looks sternly at the sleeping boy.

“Leo!” Ms. Jessica says in a loud clear tone of voice.

Leo wakes up and ‘*uh-oh*’ was the first thing that comes into his mind. Leo raises his head and looks at the annoy teacher, who had her hands on her hips.

“Leo!?! You’re sleeping in my class again!?” Ms. Jessica says while trying to look Leo in the eye. Leo feels cold sweat forming on his back.

Ms. Jessica continues, “Do you have any idea what you got on your math quiz you took last week?”

“No,” Leo replies as he sighs.

“Well then, here,” Ms. Jessica says handing Leo a piece of paper.

Leo takes his test and slowly examines it. He sighs in relief. “Total Score: 75 out of 100,” he says.

“Leo, if you would only concentrate in class I know you can get a higher, better score,” Ms. Jessica says softly.

“But I passed,” Leo says in a whiny tone of voice.

“You barely passed,” Ms. Jessica corrects him. Leo sighs.

The lunch bell rings.

“Everyone. I want you all to review what you did wrong and correct it for homework. Also, remember to finish your class work. If you didn’t finish it, that’s also for homework. You may now go to lunch,” Ms. Jessica says. Everyone stands up and starts to leave the classroom.

“Leo, you stay. I need to have a word with you,” Ms. Jessica says.

“Yes,” Leo replies.

“Leo, like I said before I know you can be better than you are now. All you need to do is try harder. If you think the work I give you is hard then ask me for help. I’ve told you that many times,” Ms. Jessica says in a soft worrying tone of voice. Leo nods and leaves the classroom without saying a word.

(At Lunch)

Leo walks into the lunchroom. The scent of fresh baked bread and cookies fills the room. He walks into the kitchen to get some lunch, then walks up to an empty table near the window and sits down.

“Hey Leo!” Someone calls out. Leo turns his head towards the voice. It was Eric, Leo’s best friend. Eric has black hair, is around the same height as Leo, and today he’s wearing a green t-shirt with black shorts.

“What’s with the long face?” Eric asks. Eric is in a different class.

“The usual,” Leo answers with a sigh. Leo starts to eat his sandwich.

“Must be tough, hearing *that* so many times,” Eric says drinking a sip of his milk.

“It is tough. I been told by Ms. Jessica to try harder, but I am trying harder,” Leo complains.

“Well,” Eric starts.

“To Ms. Jessica, you’re kind of trying harder but it isn’t enough for her to notice,” Eric says, laughing a bit.

“Don’t laugh! It’s not funny,” Leo says.

“Sorry. My bad,” Eric says, smiling. Leo sighs.

“What you should do is study and practice harder just like Ms. Jessica said. Practice makes perfect,” Eric says.

“Eric, I know, but math is just so hard and other subjects are complicated,” Leo complains.

“Leo, don’t use that as an excuse for not being motivated,” Eric says. Leo sighs and looks at Eric.

“You can tell?” Leo asks.

“Yeah. You’re so easy to read,” Eric teases.

“Well, go read someone else,” Leo says.

“Anyways, think about it Leo. Practice makes perfect. That’s what you’re told in basketball practice all the time. I know you’re not into studying but try it out. If you don’t you’ll flunk and even worse you’ll be taken out of the basketball team after you just joined in. Things like studying is best if you try it out because you will definitely have many consequences if you don’t,” Eric explains. Leo sighs.

“Ok I’ll try, but you’ll have to help me study,” Leo says. Eric smiles and nods. They both finish up their lunch and throw away their trays.

(After School)

The sun begins setting as Leo walks home from club activities. Leo opens the door to his house and walks in. He then shuts and locks the door.

“I’m home,” Leo calls out taking off his shoes.

“Welcome home!” Leo’s mother calls from the kitchen.

Leo walks up the stair and went into his room. He puts down his school bag and takes out his homework. He puts them on his desk. He then lies down on his bed. *Knock, knock.*

“Who is it?” Leo asks.

“Luna. Duh, who else could it be?” Luna replies. Leo gets out of his bed and opens the door.

“What do you want?” Leo asks.

“No nothing. Just telling you to do your homework since you always forget,” Luna answers.

“Not always,” Leo responds.

“Ok, most of the times,” Luna says as she turns the corner to her room. Leo goes back into his room and sighs. He sits down on his chair and starts to do his homework.

(One Hour Later)

“Done. Finally done,” Leo says, stretching his arms. “Wow. Did it actually take me *that* long to finish my homework?” He asks himself. It was only math homework. His worst subject. Leo can hear the sound of the door closing. It was probably Leo’s dad coming back from work.

“Leo! It’s dinner time!” Leo’s mother calls.

“Coming!” Leo responds. He hops out of his chair and goes downstairs into the living room dining table. It was quiet, really quiet.

“Leo. Sit,” Leo’s mother says with a smile. She has long brown hair, wearing a dress designed with flower. Leo sits down. Everyone started eating.

“Leo,” Leo father starts.

“Yes?” Leo asks.

“Today, I got a phone call from your Math teacher, Ms.Jessica. She said you barely passed a simple math quiz,” Leo father stated. Leo looks away. Leo’s father sighs and suddenly he snaps.

“How many times do I need to tell you? You need to study! Be serious! Concentrate! Compare yourself to Luna. She scored the best in her class and as for Stella, I got a phone call from her college saying that she was ranked in the top 10 for all 4 subjects in school. Why can’t you be like them and stop fooling around?!” Leo’s father exclaims.

“Darling calm down!” Leo’s mother yells. She turns towards Leo. “Leo, listen. We aren’t telling you to be like your sisters. We just want you to try studying to get better at things you don’t know or aren’t good at. We don’t expect much from you, okay? So don’t worry.” Leo nods, but he feels slightly guilty. He leaves the dining table.

“Are you full?” Leo mother asks. Leo turns, smiles and nods his head. As he walks up the stair he overhears a conversation.

“You’re spoiling him,” Leo’s father says.

“You’re being too harsh on him. Leo can do things if he wants. I know that he can do better if he tries harder and he will. I have faith in him. You don’t need to be so harsh on him and rush him. He isn’t Luna or Stella,” Leo’s mother says.

Leo goes into his room and sighs. *‘What should I do now?’* he thinks.

(The Next Day)

(Ding Dong) That’s the lunch bell. Leo stands up and starts to walk out of the math classroom.

“Leo. Wait!” Someone calls. Leo turns around. It was Ms. Jessica.

“What is it? If it’s some kind of lecture then I’m leaving. I don’t have time for that,” Leo responds.

“No. Of course not. I thought of a way to improve your math skills and help you be prepare for the state test. It’s coming up before you know it,” Ms. Jessica says.

“Okay…” Leo replies.

“Well, I decided to ask Bella to help you study,” Ms. Jessica says happily.

“Wait ... what!? You can’t just decide that for me.” Leo exclaims.

“If it’s for the best of my students then it’s allowed,” Ms. Jessica says. She then turns toward a girl with long black hair wearing a white jacket and a pale blue skirt.

“Bella, may you come here?” Ms. Jessica asks. Bella turns around and walks towards Ms. Jessica.

'Bella. She is the smartest student in this class. Possibility the whole grade. She is good at everything and she is popular like crazy. In other words she's a teacher pet and a role model. I just hate people like her. Having her teaching me makes me feel really dumb. Dumber than I am now,' Leo thinks.

"What is it?" Bella asks politely.

"Bella, I have a favor to ask you. It's really important. Can you accept it?" Ms. Jessica asks. *'Say no, say no, say no!'* Leo pleads in his mind. Bella nods.

Leo looks down and sighs. *'Of course she'll say yes. She's a teacher's pet,'* he thinks.

"That's great! So I want you to help Leo study. Leo is having trouble in math and possibly in other subjects. Furthermore, the state test is coming up. I know you'll need to study for the test too, but I would like you to help him improve since he has trouble studying. I'm sure you can do it," Ms. Jessica says in an encouraging voice with a gentle smile. Bella blinks a few times and then her face went blank.

"O...kay. I'll try," Bella says smiling widely (forcing a smile). Ms. Jessica beams happily.

"I knew I could count on you!" Ms. Jessica says giving Bella a slap on the back. Then she leaves the room. (Silence)

Leo breaks the silence by asking, "You're joking aren't you?"

"I wish I was," Bella answers as she sighs.

"I knew you were d..., I mean not smart, but I never realized it would be so extreme... like... *this*," Bella says with a sigh, shaking her head from side to side.

"You were about to call me dumb right?" Leo asks with a weird look.

"Who knows?" Bella says with a smile.

“Who would have thought that the most popular student in the school has a side that no one has seen?” Leo teases. Bella sighs as she shakes her head from side to side again.

“Is that supposed to be a threat?” Bella asks.

“What if I say it is?” Leo questions.

“If so, then I hope that you don’t get your hopes up. A simple threat isn’t going to scare me. Besides, I don’t care of what others think about me,” Bella says.

‘How unexpected,’ Leo thinks, looking surprised.

“Hey! What’s up Leo and Bella?” A familiar voice calls. Leo and Bella both turn to the direction of the voice.

“Eric! What’s up!” They both say in sync.

Eric looks at them with a strangely goofy expression on his face.

“Huh?” They both say in sync again looking at each other with a blank face.

“Hey, I said that first!” They say together.

Eric looks at them in amusement. “I wish I had a bowl of popcorn. This is such a nice movie,” he says with a straight face.

‘It is quite obvious that he’s trying not to laugh,’ Leo thinks.

“Eric!” He and Bella say in unison again.

They glare at each other. “I said that first!”

Eric sighs. “Can you two stop arguing like little kids?”

“I’m not a little kid,” Leo protests as Bella says at the same time, “I’m a teenager.”

“Oh whatever. Point is, why are you two arguing?” Eric asks.

“Eric!” Bella starts. “I need to help this guy-” at this, she points a finger at Leo- “study!”

“Who are you calling ‘this guy’?!” Leo protests.

“Then what am I supposed to call you?” Bella snaps. “The boy next to me? Sir I-don’t-get-good-grades-so-I-need-to-drag-this-poor-girl-into-my-problems?”

“Hey!” Leo protests again.

“Bella. Gave him a break,” Eric says.

“Okay,” Bella replies.

“So Leo, Bella is going to help you study. Isn’t that nice?” Eric teases.

“No it’s not!” Leo exclaims as Eric laughs.

“Eric,” Bella started. “How do you know him? I mean, Leo?”

“Oh. Leo is my friend. We came from the same middle school and elementary school. We became friends ever since we were little. We’ve known each other for a long time,” Eric explains. “Leo, as you already know, this is Bella. She’s a friend of mine. She is also from the same middle and elementary school from us, though I doubt you know or remember.”

“Really? She has been in the same school as us all this time? I never noticed,” Leo says.

“I figured,” Eric says with a shrug.

“So how do you know her?” Leo asks.

“Our parents know each other. You could say that we are childhood friends,” Eric explains. He turns to Bella. “Bella, helping Leo study is a tough job. Do you think you’ll be able to handle it?”

“I think I can,” Bella answers.

“You don’t have to force yourself to help Leo all by yourself. Besides, you’re not good with being around boys. Want me to help?” Eric says. Bella nods.

'Not good around boys. How unexpected, though I've never seen her around boys many times,' Leo thinks.

"Aren't you a boy?" Leo asks.

"I'm different," Eric answers.

"Anyway, when are you both free? We can study at the library and other places, if necessary."

"I'm free anytime," Eric says.

"Me too," Leo says.

"Don't you have basketball club after school?" Eric asks.

"We don't have any practice since the state test is coming up," Leo explains.

"The state test, huh? What a pain," Eris says, putting both of his arms on the back of his head.

"Okay then today we can stay after school in the library to help you study. I'll prepare the things we'll need," Bella says as she walks off.

"She quite reliable," Leo says.

"She is. You can count on her anytime," Eric says.

"Okay, let's go. Lunch is almost over," Leo says walking away.

"Hey, wait up!" Eric calls.

(After School in the school's library)

"Okay. So here are the things that you'll need to cover." Bella says as she puts down a stack of books and handouts.

“Wow, that’s a lot,” Eric says looking at Leo who has his head down on the table.

“Don’t worry. You don’t necessarily have to finish them all. Most of them contains the things that we have learned in class that you don’t understand,” Bella says.

“Demon,” Leo says in a soft, quiet tone. Bella slams the table loud enough to gather Leo’s attention and not disturb others in the library. Leo looks up and says, “Sorry.”

“Ok. First off, Leo, which subjects are you not good at?” Bella asks.

“All,” Leo says. Bella looks at Leo with a *you’ve-got-to-be-joking* face.

“Mainly it’s math,” Eric says as he can see that Leo is teasing Bella.

“Thanks Eric,” Bella says smiling. She turns to Leo. “Okay, first do these handouts. I’ll see if you understand these questions. It’s helped me see what you’ll need to work on.” She hands Leo some worksheets. Leo moans as he starts doing the handouts.

“Eric can you help me out with a few things?” Bella asks.

“Sure,” Eric says standing up.

“I’d like you to help me organize questions that Leo may have hard times with based on your personal experience with him. So think of questions that you think will be kind of hard for him to understand. For example, you can change the context of the question or make the math harder. Here’s some advice from Ms. Jessica,” Bella explains handing him a few handouts. Eric smiles.

“You’re really giving your all. Why are you trying so hard?” Eric asks.

“Huh. Not really. Though I don’t even know why myself,” Bella replies as she looks through other sheets of paper.

“You’re so kind as always,” Eric says softly.

“Here. I’m finished with these handouts,” Leo says giving it to Bella.

“You have better not rushed through them,” Eric says.

“I didn’t!” Leo protests.

“So far so good. All correct. Seems like you have no problems with probability, graphs, fractions, ratios, percentages, and decimals. You’re also fine with geometric problems such as volume, area, perimeter, scaling and others. You’re not so dumb after all,” Bella comments.

“Hey! That’s not a compliment,” Leo says as Eric giggles.

“You should take it as one,” Bella says smiling.

“You’ll need to worry about algebraic questions and converting rational numbers into decimals and fractions as well as ratios and proportional relationships. This one is a bit hard to understand,” Bella explains.

“Eh? So you don’t understand that either?” Leo teases.

“Did I say that *I* had a hard time understanding? I meant that you’ll have a hard time understanding,” Bella says as Eric laughs.

“Anyway I’m surprised that you knew so much already. Just a few days ago, you were having so much trouble on math in things like probability and scaling in shapes. Seems like you studied quite a bit. Did you study secretly?” Eric says smiling. Leo blushes a tiny bit.

‘Bullseye,’ Bella thinks as she starts to laugh.

“What are you laughing about?” Leo asks, looking embarrassed.

“No, it’s nothing,” Bella says, still laughing and Eric joins in too.

“Not you too Eric!” Leo protests still blushing a little. Bella stops and so does Eric.

“Sorry. It’s just that ..., I never seen your face like that,” Eric says.

“You must have been studying hard, ” Eric says. Leo looks away.

“Anyway, that’s a good sign. It seem like that you tried really hard to cover all that you don’t understand in such a short time. It seem like you’re not so dumb after all. You’re just not trying,” Bella says.

“Trying so hard is gonna fry my brain, you hag,” Leo teases with a smirk.

“That was really rude. As I expected from a person like you,” Bella replies.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Leo says.

“Now, now. Let’s not try to fight,” Eric says as he try to pull them apart.

“He started it first,” Bella complains.

“I did not,” Leo says.

“Leo, I saw that you started it so don’t say that you didn’t,” Eric says looking at him as Leo turns to look in another direction.

Bella sigh as she says, “Okay, okay. Now let’s finish up and go home. I have seen how much you know. Personally, I think it’s not a bad start. If you continue then you’ll be able to catch up to the standards in no time.”

“Leo, why don’t we continue to help you study? Meanwhile you can try to study by yourself at home. Look, the results of your secret studying sessions are already showing up. You’re improving!” Eric exclaims with an encouraging tone of voice as he smiles. Leo looks at Eric and sighs.

“Okay. All I have to do is study right?” Leo asks. Bella and Eric nods. “Fine. I’ll study and get better,” he says. Eric and Bella both smile.

“Then, let’s study together again tomorrow,” Eric says. “Well, if you don’t mind,” Eric adds softly.

Bella nods and Leo sighs.

“Okay,” they both say together as Eric nods and smiles.

(The Next Day)

(At school in the math classroom, currently taking a small math test)

“Ok. Time’s up. Stop writing, put down your pencils and hand in the tests. After that you may leave,” Ms. Jessica shouts. Everyone starts to stand up and one by one they hand in their tests and leave. “Leo! I would like to talk to you.” Ms. Jessica says.

Leo stops and turns around.

Bella, who overheard them, also stops to see what’s the matter. *‘I shouldn’t be eavesdropping. I’ll just ask Leo what Ms. Jessica says to him,’* Bella thinks as she leaves the classroom.

“Leo, I’m gonna grade your test first. It will take a while. I want to see how much you have improved. I know it’s just one day so there shouldn’t be much difference, but I saw you, Bella and Eric in the library working together and Bella told me that you’re trying really hard and that you’re improving at a fast rate,” Ms. Jessica explains. Leo sits down as he waits for Ms. Jessica to grade his test.

(A few minutes later)

Ms. Jessica stands up as she neatly stacks up the test papers. She sighs.

‘Oh-oh,’ Leo thinks.

Ms. Jessica walks up to Leo's seat and looks him in the eye. Leo begins to feel cold, dry sweat forming on his back and on his face. Suddenly, Ms. Jessica smiles.

"Leo, you must've tried really hard. You definitely have improved," she says in a happy, cheerful tone, smiling.

"Huh?" Leo says in confusion as Ms. Jessica hands him his test. On it was a score of 89 out of 100. A look of surprise appears on his face when he sees his score. He smiles and laughs.

"Continue the good work. You have improved by more than 10%. Things that you have had trouble with just one or two days ago are correct. Leo, you're a bright and smart student. I know you can do it," Ms. Jessica says in a nice, encouraging, and cheerful tone as she gives Leo a gentle smile. Leo feels all happy inside. He leaves the classroom with a big cheerful smile.

(After school on the way to Leo's home)

As a month flies by, Leo, Eric and Bella all study for the math state test until the day they put their knowledge to the test. Days have passed since they took the math state test. From day to night, Leo was worried.

"When is the result gonna come out? It has been about two months already!" Leo complains as he walks in circles, running his hand through his hair..

"Leo, calm down. You gave it your all and you were studying properly, so things will be just fine. I know that you'll pass and move on to the next grade," Eric says in an encouraging tone of voice, but Leo can also detect a small note of worry.

"Calm down. You'll be fine. You gave it your all and that's all there's to it. Giving your all to something shows how much you care about it. You can change yourself for the better if

you really want to get better. Be smart of what you do and always try before giving up on something that you think is impossible,” Bella says.

“But it’s just so hard to calm down! My head’s full of worry,” Leo complains. “Have you got your test grade back yet?” He asks.

“I did and I passed,” Bella says proudly.

“How come we all get it all at different times?” Leo asks.

“That’s probably because it was all graded at a different time and they just happened to have finished grading Bella’s first,” Eric explains. Leo nods.

(They have now arrive at Leo’s home)

Leo opens the door and invites Eric and Bella in.

“Leo, I received a letter for you this morning,” Leo’s mother calls out as she walks into the living room, handing him the letter. “Welcome home. It seems like Eric is here too. And you are...” She looks at Bella.

“I’m Bella. It’s really nice to meet you,” Bella says softly and politely.

“Oh, you’re Bella. I heard a lot of things about you from Eric when he comes here to visit, and Leo talks about you too. Thank you for helping Leo out!” Leo’s mother says as she smiles gently.

“No, it’s alright,” Bella says.

“I’ll go prepare some orange juice for you guys. Would that be alright?” Leo’s mother asks. The three of them nod as she walks into the kitchen. Leo leads Bella and Eric to his room.

‘Wow, it’s surprisingly neat! I was positive that it would be a mess in here,’ Bella thinks as she steps in Leo’s room.

“Do you think this is what I think this is?” Leo asks Bella and Eric.

“Only if you’re thinking what I’m thinking,” Bella says.

“Come on! Open it!” Eric says. The truth is now revealed.

“Leo Cheng, ID: XXXXXXXXXX. Congratulations, you have passed both the ELA and Math state test,” Bella reads out loud as a smile appears on Leo’s face.

“YAY! I passed, passed!” he exclaims jumping around.

“Congratulation. Seem like the studying pay off,” Eric says smiling as he gave Leo a thumbs up. Leo nods and smiles back as they high-five each other.

“Congratulations. Seems like you were lucky this time,” Bella says.

“Do you have to put it that way?” Leo says as he gives Bella a weird stare.

“Well, you can say it’s her way of congratulating you,” Eric explains.

“There can be a better way to say it.” Leo says looking at Bella.

“Anyway, isn’t it nice? You passed the test. You studied really hard for it. See? Hard work won’t be in vain,” Bella says smiling.

“Well, yeah. I guess you can say that,” Leo says, scratching the back of his head.

“It all goes well and it all ends well!” Eric says, smiling as he and Leo give each other a fist bump. Bella watches with a smile.