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HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

It was hard to believe that it was over. Toby slowly stood up from his seat and followed the shorter cheetah in the row in front of him; it was still hard to wrap his head around it. It was over. High school was over, or at least it would be in just a few seconds as the bunny's row of students was lined up by the edge of the large stage that had been haphazardly erected in the middle of the school football field; the only place that could house the thousand or so students and all of their families.

"This is it, dude," the cheetah in front of him said, turning over his shoulder and giving the bunny a giddy grin. Toby simply nodded and stifled a chuckle in response, noting how the cheetah was practically bouncing up and down as they slowly meandered their way toward the stage; Chad had always been a bundle of hyperactive energy. It was why he had been drawn to sports and consequently had dragged Toby along too, a fact that the bunny was reminded of as he turned toward the crowd and saw his track coach sitting in a suit and tie in the teacher section. They locked eyes and the stout otter gave the bunny a nod; was he tearing up too? It was hard for Toby to tell from a distance, and though he was excited to finally cross the stage and be finished with high school forever, he was going to miss his coach.

Toby hadn't played many sports growing up in elementary and middle school not necessarily because he didn't want to, but because he didn't have the time. His family owned a large farm on the far side of town and growing up, he and his older siblings were expected to help out with the chores and harvesting. His parents instilled an ethic of hard work in him at a young age and while it had been tough baling hay as an eight-year-old and fertilizing the carrot fields while simultaneously reading his books for his middle school social studies class for the notoriously strict Mrs. Buttersfield, he had enjoyed his time on the farm.

He was close to his family, though being the youngest had come with some difficulties. Toby stood at a towering 6' 4", often turning heads for folks from out of town, but locals knew that even though Toby was tall for a bunny, the rest of his family was even bigger; the goliaths of the lagomorpha. Both of his older brothers and even his older sister stood several inches taller than himself with his father being the tallest of the bunch, each sporting stocky frames built by years of hard farm work. Though Toby worked just as hard, he never truly acquired that characteristic Thompson physique, instead, being a bit lither though still strong.

It was that athletic frame that caught the eye of his track coach when Toby would meet his cheetah friend Chad after the feline finished practice. Both the otter, with a little help from Chad, ultimately convinced Toby to attend just one practice, to see what he could do and though he was a little awkward on the track, one thing became clear: the bunny could jump! Toby seemingly effortlessly managed to jump nearly as far as some of the gazelles on the team that had been training for years in the long jump and triple jump and with his naturally tall height, he instantly became one of the best high jumpers too. Just for kickers, the otter had Toby try out some of the throwing events too, and while Toby struggled with the technique of the shotput and discus, his javelin thrown was second to none, apparently honed by years of playing a game with his siblings where they would throw fencing stakes across fields to save time when unloading them from the back of a trailer.

With some help and begging, from his coach, Toby was able to convince his parents to let him try track his senior year, the first of many tough decisions that Toby knew his parents were making. Family was an extremely important aspect of life for the Thompsons, with Toby's father, in particular, wanting to keep as many hands close to home and on the family farm as possible to maintain their livelihood. When each of his older siblings had graduated from school, there was no question that they would be staying on the family farm, but Toby had other aspirations. He felt a little ashamed of even thinking about leaving his parents and siblings behind, but unlike his siblings, he had actually done well in school.

One afternoon, his teachers had called his parents in for a meeting to try and convince them to let Toby apply for colleges as he had a real potential to do something great. Toby knew that his parents were hesitant but not out of selfishness, but concern. Toby had never been away from home before and they knew the world as a cruel and dangerous place. What if the school was too hard for him? What if... Toby's teachers assured his parents that he was more than capable of handling himself academically anywhere he went and that he was smart enough to stay out of trouble. Though Toby's parents were still worried, they reluctantly agreed to allow Toby to apply. Toby could visibly see their struggle of wanting the best for him but also in a way secretly hoping we wouldn't get in anywhere at all, to stay nice and safe at home where his help was needed.

Despite that, when Toby had applied and got into Tallow University, one of the best schools in the Midwest, his mom and dad were happy for him. Sure he got some teasing about being a bookworm by his siblings, but they were all proud. They were proud too when he went on during his track season to place third in the long jump and triple jump, and second in both high jump and javelin at the state championship meet. Toby felt an odd sense of pride too. Pride in showing that he was capable, that he was able to do great things on his own; to show his family that he would be alright.

As the number of fur between Toby and the stage dwindled, Toby glanced out into the crowd again and spotted his family as they stood looming in the back; they weren't ones much for sitting down for long periods of time. Toby could see both his mother and father tearing up and squeezing each other tight while his siblings hooted and hollered as he took to the stage right behind Chad.

"Chad Abara!" The principal announced as the cheetah bolted across the stage, grabbed his diploma and held it above his head as if he had found some coveted treasure. Toby chuckled, knowing that despite the cheetah's rambunctiousness nature, that he too was headed to Tallow University this fall with him. The cheetah was going to be only the second in his family to head to college, right behind his sister who had been the valedictorian two years prior. Because of that high bar, many thought of Chad as merely as that track kid who sometimes ran beyond the finish line at meets, but he was a smart kid too, in his own way. Many didn't know why he and Toby had been virtually inseparable since they had met in middle school, with Chad being the outgoing cheetah that he was and Toby being the quiet farm boy, but their friendship ran deep and both of them were excited to spend the next four years together too.

"Hurry up dude!" Chad said, trying to rush Toby as he grabbed his diploma from the principal. "My mom's got the camera ready!"

"I don't know about this," Toby muttered.

“Come on, everyone does it!” Chad said as he pulled Toby forward toward the edge of the stage and pointed toward a lanky spotted feline standing by the stairs along the edge, boxing out the other parents trying to snap pictures of their kids. “Ready? One, two, three!” With a whoosh, Chad pulled up his graduation gown, revealing his track uniform underneath. He then turned toward Toby and gave him a smile. “Come on!” With a nervous smile, Toby pulled up his gown too, revealing his own uniform.

“Now pose!” Chad said, prompting the two to pose triumphantly as the cheetah’s mom aggressively snapped pictures with her phone.

“I need more smile Toby!” she called above the din of the cheering crowd, using her free paw to push aside a boisterous lynx parent.

“People are looking,” Toby muttered.

“That’s the point, dude!” Chad assured, “Just relax and enjoy the moment. We’re graduates, we’ve got to go out in style!” Toby sighed and with a newfound charisma pointed his finger into the air triumphantly.

“There we go!” Chad’s mom said.

“Whooo, we’re graduates!” Chad said as the two broke their pose and ran down the stairs, Toby trying to keep up with the cheetah. “Oh man this summer is going to be great but I can’t wait until we get to college! Are we’re going to room together? Of course, we are, and when we’re there we can do whatever we want. We can go to class then go play Frisbee then go get ice cream then do a little dance and...” Toby chuckled as he let Chad ramble on and on. Despite the cheetah’s excited tone, the bunny knew the cheetah only rambled like this when he was nervous. It was a big transition they were both going through and though Chad was optimistic by nature, the unknown was still scary. Still, the excitement that was buried underneath that fear was infectious. Toby could feel it radiating from his spotted friend, making Toby’s heart flutter too, though his excitement too was blunted. He was both dreading leaving his family, his farm, and his own town and heading two states away for school, but there was a little tinkle of excitement in his gut about that sense of independence.

“How’d the pic come out, Mom?” Chad asked as he rushed up to his mother along the edge of the seating area.

“Oh, you two are quite the pair! You’re going to have so much fun next year!” the motherly cheetah said.

Yeah, I guess we will, Toby thought. I guess we will...



FRESHMAN YEAR

Toby could hear Chad's foot tapping rapidly on the ground on the other side of the room. Toby glanced up from his sprawled out textbook and notepads and looked over his shoulder toward the cheetah staring intently at an old oil painting sprawled across the screen on the computer on his desk; Toby was kind of glad he wasn't taking art history, in fact, in many ways he was glad he wasn't studying art in general like his cheetah friend; he just didn't quite have the creative touch for it as Chad had. Chad had always been on the artistic side but it even shocked Toby when he decided to study it for his bachelors.

The moment that classes had started up, the feline was constantly working on some large colorful project for his studio art class or lugging tomes of photos of old paintings in museums halfway around the world, taking in each with exquisite detail before writing a dozen pages on one particular feature; Toby did not envy the cheetah. Toby preferred the direct and specific answers from his science classes for his plant biology major; that was more his style. Still, Toby knew that the bags under the cheetah's eyes probably matched his own, though he figured that's just what happens during finals week. To Toby, it was hard to believe that an entire semester had gone by, his and Chad's first semester at that, and what a semester it had been.

Though Toby had teared up a bit when his parents unloaded the last box back in August and had to leave to head back home to the far before quote “his brothers and sister burned down the farm,” but that’s when Chad had stepped in. The excited cheetah had immediately dragged the bunny to all the opening weekend orientation events that they could physically go to; the feline was always one to want to meet new people. It just seemed to come naturally to him as he was at introducing said people to the far shier bunny, distracting him from his familial separation.

Before Toby knew it, the two of them had signed up for a dozen different clubs and activities and had won a myriad of Tallow-themed gadgets and t-shirts from student affairs groups and other departments advertising their on-campus services; it was a little overwhelming. Though Chad had ultimately convinced Toby to head to the evening dance put on by some DJ that Toby didn’t know, when the two had finally made it back to their dorm room which was still filled with their unopened boxes from moving, the two had set up the television and played a bit of Mario Kart. Toby had liked that. It was that moment that Toby remembered most fondly from that chaotic day: just him and his best friend relaxing like nothing had changed, save for the fact that they played until four in the morning all because they could now. They were on their own. They had autonomy. They could do whatever they want!

Within reason, Toby had reminded himself, though he still found himself trying out salsa dancing, learning how to crochet, and holding up a sign to protect the cutting down of a large historic tree along the edge of campus. Sure, with the latter Toby, with his farming expertise, could tell the tree was already dead on the inside due to rot, but for him, it was more about the experience than the specifics. He wanted to make the most of his time in college, his chance to dive into his studies and learn how to live on his own, away from his family, and learn he did.

One of the first hard lessons he had to learn on his road to independence was how to do his own laundry, which he learned the hard way after he and the cheetah combined loads and dumped nearly half a bottle of detergent in; needless to say both their clothes and the entire laundry room floor were thoroughly clean afterward. There were positives, however, such as the food. Sure, during high school they had had some culinary choices at the school cafeteria, but Toby had often brought his own lunch from home, packed by his father and sometimes sister. That had prevented much of that paralysis of choice that often befell Chad when the lunch bell had rung and which befell both of them on a seemingly a daily basis now when they went to one of the many campus cafeterias.

The first time they had gone to the picturesque culinary conglomerate, they were both blown away by just how many options there were: there was a salad bar, a fruit bar, and all day breakfast station, a pasta station, an Indian curry station, and burritos, and pizza, and burgers, and anything else under the

sun, right there and prime for the taking. Needless to say, instead of making a single choice, the cheetah and bunny often simply took a bit of everything. They'd lug two full plates of a random assortment of quesadillas and pulled pork, salmon and sweet potato fries, and even soups and ramens when the days were rainy and cold.

There was hardly a time when the two of them didn't leave the cafeteria feeling absolutely stuffed, there was just so much food to try. As often happened, they'd finish their two heaping plates and want to grab just an extra helping of pasta. Then next time they'd grab some extra pasta and another scoop of fresh berries. Then next time they'd throw on another thin slice of pizza which eventually turned into a full slice. Before they knew it, two plates no longer made them full, prompting the third to become standard and then the fourth plate became "extra" helpings; just like if you stretch a pair of pants long enough you eventually need a bigger rear to fill it, their stomachs were gradually expanding.

Of course, this was unbeknownst to the bunny and cheetah as they had other, more important things in mind as their school work quickly kicked into gear. Unlike in high school where it typically took a few weeks to really get into the grind of work, the two found that college was a completely different story. Information came flying at them at breakneck speed and they had to adjust quickly. Though Toby tried to keep them to a minimum, he and Chad quickly learned what the legendary "all-nighter" truly was as they tried to finish lab reports and essays in time for their strict professors in the morning.

As their academic binges went well into the night, the cafeterias were often closed, forcing the two to order out for pizza and takeout at odd hours of the night, an occasional treat to get through another chapter in a textbook that recently had become more of a regular routine in their haphazard diets. They didn't have delivery back home, so it was easy to fall into the comfortable trap of having prepared food given to you right at the doorstep of your dorm or library; you didn't even need to walk to the cafeteria, a big selling point now that it was getting cold at the end of the year and snow was starting to accumulate on the ground.

At that moment, a half-eaten box of pizza lay on the floor next to Toby while the half-eaten remnants of three different bags of Doritos and a large can of an energy drink that Toby had never heard of were on the edge of Chad's desk. The two had hardly left their room in the last week as they studied for their final examinations, with the only times they did being trips to study at the library. They were tired, and stress, and in need of a...

"Break!" Chad said, slamming his hands down on the edge of his desk on either side of his computer, causing Toby to jump in his seat.

"What?" Toby asked.

"I need a break... I just can't focus... I just need uh..." Chad said, rubbing his temples with his paws before grabbing his phone. He scrolled for barely three seconds before jumping up from his desk, life suddenly flowing back to his face. "Oh hell yes!"

"What is it?" Toby asked, spinning around in his chair. He stared at the cheetah as buried his face in his phone, reading something intently. Toby had seen that face on the cheetah many a time before, that look of such intense concentration that hardly an earthquake could stir him from the task at hand, though this time something seemed a little different. Maybe it was the glow of the phone or the strange overhead lighting in their dorm room, but it seemed like the cheetah's face was a bit rounder than usual. The flesh beneath his chin seemed to compress slightly as Chad hunched forward while the contours of his jawline seemed less sharp as if they were hiding behind a veil of... veil of well... fa...

"Tacos," Chad said.

"Tacos?" Toby asked.

"The Latinx Union is hosting a finals week Taco Fest on Central Campus, we should go!" Toby simply watched Chad turn and grab his jacket. Once again, it was a sight that the bunny had seen many times before, but right then something seemed different. The outdoor attire seemed to fall different over the cheetah's torso as if bowing out slightly around some hidden bulge of...

"So, what do you say?" Chad asked. "You coming?"

"I don't know," Toby said, snapping back to reality, "I've still got three chapters to review before going over some practice problems and..." Toby sputtered as Chad lunged across the room, grabbed his wrist and pulled him to his feet.

"That wasn't a question, it was a request," Chad said. "We need to get out and get some fresh air, clear the mind and what not," the cheetah said, opening the door. "Better put on a coat, it's cold out!" Toby grabbed his jacket and rushed out the door, realizing that he was only wearing shorts before rushing back, throwing on a pair of sweatpants, and meeting Chad in the dorm lobby. The two scrunched their necks as they opened the door and the bluster of winter pounded against their bundled up frames. It wasn't snowing, but at times it felt like it as the Midwestern wind whipped up the six inches of snow that already coated the campus in a thick blanket of white. The pair had to maneuver around snow piles and the caterpillar snow plows working their way along the sidewalks of campus, keeping the walkways as clear as possible during the most stressful time of the year for students.

Eventually, the two made it to the central campus green and wandered into the student activities building on the far side. They both relished in the sense of warmth that came from the blasting heat vent in the doorway as they unfurled their scrunched shoulders and bared witness to the chaos before them.

Apparently, they weren't the only ones with their hopes set on some finals week tacos as hundreds upon hundreds of furs were crowded around a series of tables lining the side wall of the open atrium before them. They saw elephants reaching over otters and several avians fluttering in the air, their scarves swirling in their faces, as they tried to grab as many of the premade tacos lining the tables as they could. It was a free for all!

"Come on!" Chad said a gleeful excitement in his voice as he pulled Toby into the scrum. Before Toby realized what was going on, the cheetah had swung him around in front and pushed him from behind, using the tall bunny as a battering ram to pushing throw the roaring crowd.

"Sorry, excuse me, sorry," Toby said as he wormed his way in between fellow furs until he reached the mosh pit at the front. He could see a flustered looking jaguar and llama as they tried to keep restocking the tacos rapidly disappearing from their tables; they definitely weren't prepared for the onslaught.

"Grab some!" Chad called from behind. Toby reached his long arm over a ferret and grabbed three tacos and handed them back to Chad. He reached and grabbed three more in the frenzy before he was shoved aside by a voracious looking rhino. Toby clutched his prize as he followed Chad out of the crowd and toward the back of the room where there was a window ledge to relax on.

"It's crazy in here!" Chad said.

"No kidding," Toby replied, trying to still his pounding heart.

"But we got the motherload!" Chad said. Toby stared down at the large tacos in his paws before he heard a loud gulp to his right and turned to see Chad already cramming one of the tacos into his mouth. The cheetah ate quickly, a technique he had learned after waking up late to classes on more than one occasion as he tried to get down a breakfast sandwich, or two, on his way to lecture. Toby chuckled and picked up one of his own, balancing the others on his legs as he brought the morsel to his mouth. With just one bite, his mouth exploded with the mildly spicy taste of beef and melted cheese. A crisp crunch of lettuce and a sweet barrage of green tomato pico de gallo washed over his taste buds, eliciting a moan from the back of his throat and a rumble from his stomach.

"See, *chew, I told you that you needed this," Chad said. Toby simply nodded in agreement; he hadn't realized just how hungry he was. Sure, he had eaten half a pizza not too long ago in his room, but all his studying since must have really worked up his appetite! The bunny chewed and swallowed quickly, suckling down the first taco in no time at all; he didn't hesitate to try the next. Toby hadn't really been a fan of fish before, but the crispy flounder in the second taco was to die for. That bit of fried white fish was just what he needed as he could physically feel a weight lift off his mind; there was just something so

satisfying about that fatty, greasy flavor! Though his stomach was starting to feel full, when he hesitated for just a second as he picked up his third oversized taco, he heard Chad scoff at him.

“Come on, just finish it!” Chad encouraged through his taco-filled mouth. “You’ve worked hard and long enough to earn yourself a treat!” Toby watched as Chad pressed the remainders of his taco into his maw before turning and giving Toby a playful smile as his cheeks puffed far out to the side. Toby contained a chuckle before starting to chomp through his own morsel. The taste of spiced chicken washed over his tastebuds, giving them a little fire that seemed to warm him from the inside out. The bunny relished in that warm feeling as he worked through the entire taco. He let out a soft groan as he felt the weight of his fast meal sloshing around his insides, likely joining the remains of his prior greasy meals.

“Ah...” Chad said, relaxing back against the window, “that was so good. Probably better than those tacos down at Oaxaca Valley downtown, though I do think they prepare their fish a little better. Also the presentation there was better, but then again they’re a restaurant and not a student group providing food for the masses. Speaking of mass, did I tell you that Dr. Jobaron complimented my technique in creating the perception of mass on my last portfolio piece? It sounds good and all but that just means the pressure is on for my final project...”

“I’m sure you’ll nail it,” Toby reassured. Chad was rambling again; he was certainly stressed. Toby had seen this before and knew that just letting the cheetah ramble would help him destress, so Toby simply sat back and let his friend talk for the both of them. Suddenly the cheetah suddenly shot back up and onto his paws.

“Whelp, back to work!” the cheetah said.

“Yeah,” Toby huffed, “I guess you’re right.” The bunny held out his hand and Chad helped pull him to his feet.

“First though,” Chad said, motioning toward the taco tables again that now had a far less raucous crowd, “how about we grab a little snack or two for the road?”



SOPHOMORE YEAR

“Compare the rates of heat transfer from a tractor’s engine on the frame of the engine compartment with and without an internal insulating sealant with the following physical properties,” Toby read aloud from the practice problem worksheet in his textbook. He had been working through problems for hours in preparation for a quiz that was two days away in his Basics in Agriculture Mechanical Engineering class and though he had already finished the assigned review problems nearly an hour ago, he just wanted to do more; he had never been so invested in a class before!

Coming into college, Toby had had the mindset of studying something that could make him more useful for when he likely went back home to the farm after graduation, hence why he had started studying plant biology. He had figured that learning more about the crops that his family were growing could give him insights into producing a higher yield harvest and helping give his family more financial stability. This semester, however, he had an extra class slot to take an elective and on a whim he thought maybe an engineering class might be fun. He had always been good with numbers and math and learning about farm equipment might help him with repairs back on the farm.

He had gone in merely with a bit of curiosity, but after the first day, he was captivated. His professor had started talking about not just the nitty-gritty of basic engineering essentials 101, but the role of innovation and creativity in conceiving the next generation of equipment to aid the farming industry. One of their first projects had been to come up with a common difficulty in agriculture that technology could help solve and it was like the flood gates had opened. All of the strife and ideas that Toby had had working on the farm came flooding forward, an outlet for his wild ideas for a multi-terrain tractor that could effectively work on hilly or rocky fields and a root vegetable collector that would selective pull out only veggies that had grown to full size, leaving behind in the soil those that still needed to grow. The class had sparked a creative curiosity about how to make such technologies come to reality, that the bunny had become obsessed with the class, so much so that he was rethinking his entire educational outlook; a shift that was causing him some emotional strife.

Toby turned to look over his shoulder as he heard the door open and saw Chad strolling in. The cheetah had two large brown bags in his hand and a warm smile on his face as he held the two up like there were prize catches from a jungle expedition.

“Guess what I’ve got?” Chad said in a sing-song voice, walking over and placing one of the bags on the edge of Toby’s desk. The bunny would recognize the characteristic stylized silhouette of the cow between two burger buns any day anywhere: The Grille. The Grille was a burger joint on campus that had opened after a student protest against a franchise burger spot that had poor sanitation and worker conditions. Since it opened a few years ago, it had become the heart and soul of the campus, run by a former Tallow University dietetics graduate student. Sure, many people questioned the true nutritional value of the thick slabs of meat stuffed between the classic pretzel bun that the Grille was famous for, but “health food” wasn’t really why people went a burger joint in the first place. With several vegetarian and vegan spots on campus and in the cafeterias, people went to The Grille to satisfy that singular urge to indulge.

“Thought you could use a pick me up,” Chad said.

“Thank you,” Toby replied, sliding the bag over and opening it up. The smell of the triple fired fries and the dual carrot and lamb burger wafted into his nose: his favorite! Chad always knew just what the bunny wanted as they did go to the Grille enough that the cheetah could recite the bunny’s usual order in his sleep.

“No problem,” Chad said, plopping down onto one of the beanbag chairs on the floor with his own greasy bag. Toby watched as the cheetah took out his own double-decker burger, the feline licking his lips as he brought the morsel to his mouth. Toby had seen his friend chow down on the Double Trouble

burger many times before, but it was that repetition that was evident to the bunny. As Chad chewed, Toby could see the cheetah's cheeks bulge out the sides of his face, stretching his spots beyond their recent stretched nature; not all of that curvature was from the greasy food stuffed in his maw. Toby noted how Chad's jaw seemed to sink and disappear slightly into his neck as he opened his maw for a hefty bite, the flesh along his neck compressing into a thick fold that was clearly a double chin. The cheetah's face had grown far more round as of late, as had the rest of his frame.

Part of Toby was surprised at the small set of moobs that were jutting out of his friend's chest, outlined by the shirt that was clearly too small for the feline. Toby didn't know why he hadn't fully noticed before how even the largest of the cheetah's shirts seemed to ride up his torso, revealing the mound of flesh that had spurted out from the cheetah's middle. The mound of pudge was starting to resemble the beanbag chair he was sat on while his once lithe legs had taken on a far plumper appearance. A thick rear bulged out of his backside and splayed slightly across the seat of the beanbag chair while his calves had taken on a more bulbous shape.

Part of Toby felt a little guilty having never truly noticed the extent of the freshman fifteen that his friend had put on, especially because that soft weight certainly totaled more than fifteen pounds. Had the bunny just been so engrossed in his books, in his engineering projects, that he hadn't noticed his best friend and roommate garnering that extra curvature to his sides and waist? All those long hours in the library as the two munched through snacks and pizzas and all those long nights fueled by bottles of soda and energy drinks? That routine of studying keeping them distracted to anything outside of their textbooks and assignments, keeping them unaware of all those empty calories they used to fuel their work? Maybe that obliviousness was a sign of the thoughts that were plaguing the bunny's mind, a conflict of his morals and priorities that he needed to get off his chest.

"Your burger is going to get cold," Chad said as he licked his fingers clean of his greasy morsel.

"Yeah," Toby chuckled nervously. "Yeah... Hey Chad, can I ask you something?"

"Of course, I'm all ears dude," Chad said, wiping his fingers along the edge of his shirt before grabbing the Xbox controller on the ground beside him.

"I think I'm going to change my major," Toby said with an exasperated sigh.

"That's awesome dude. Hold on let me guess," Chad said with a knowing grin. "You've been so inspired by my still life drawings of fruit that you're going to become an artist too. You know what, I'm truly honored to be your role model and..."

"Not that," Toby chuckled. "I think I'm going to change over to Mechanical Engineering."

“You know what, that was going to be my second guess,” Chad said. Toby shot him a look and the cheetah threw up his hands defensively. “No seriously, I was. It’s so obvious.”

“What do you mean?” Toby asked.

“Dude, I left two hours ago to go to a meeting and pick up food and when I got back you literally hadn’t moved in your seat or taken your eyes off those physics or engineering problems or whatever all that gross math stuff is. You have diagrams of farm equipment on the wall above your desk, which leave a lot to be desired in terms of composition, spacing, and proportions might I add, and the other night I saw you fall asleep on what must be a new SolidWorks branded pillow cover.”

“So it is pretty obvious,” Toby said.

“Yeah,” Chad said. “Is that what you wanted to ask about? If you want to change your major, you should!”

“I do want to,” Toby said, “But...”

“But what? If engineering is something you’re interested in, then you should pursue it! You have some awesome ideas that you could make a reality with more training, skills, and classes and...!”

“That’s just it, it feels like it’s all about me and...”

“And you’re worried that you might be leaving your family behind?”

Man, he really is good at reading people, Toby thought.

“Is that what you’re worried about?” Chad asked again.

“I mean, my father is starting to get older and with that new Paramount industrial farm opening up back home making it harder to compete, I feel like I need to learn more about crops and increasing produce yields...”

“Is that what you’re really learning in plant biology?”

“Well... no, we’re learning more about different species of flowers and the history of rainforests but...”

“But you’re hoping that at some point you’ll learn all of that practical information?”

“Well, yeah.”

“Listen, dude,” Chad said, his tone far more serious than Toby had ever heard it. “You are a smart, amazing guy and you deserve to follow your own interests and dreams. I have seen you read an owner’s manual for the industrial size rototiller for the campus gardens that you found lying around and I’ve barely seen you open your plant bio books this year. You’re clearly passionate about this and though it may feel like you’re turning your back on something that might possibly help out your family farm someday, you

really aren't. Think about it. If you can design better farm equipment, you can make it for your family and help them farm their crops better and push those Paramount wannabees out of town!"

"Yeah..."

"You are far more valuable to your family by doing what you love. I don't think either your mom, pop, or any of your siblings would fault you for that!"

"Yeah, I guess you're right!" Toby a warm smile spreading across his face as a weight was seemingly lifted from his heart, mind, and shoulders. "Thank you Chad, you always know just what to say."

"Hey call me the bunny whisperer. Now as a bunny whisperer, I command you to close your books, grab your fries and come play Death Squadron, we were so close to beating the final battle at the pantheon last week and I don't think I can do it solo." Toby sighed. He glanced at his sprawled out notes and textbooks before chuckling; he did need a break, especially after that life talk.

He grabbed his Grille bag and stood up, grunting as he did so. His knees ached from sitting so long and his rear tingled from squishing against the base of his desk chair. Toby noted how his body felt so heavy and tired, and though part of him instinctively wanted to blame that simply on the late hour or the fact he had been studying for twelve of the last fourteen hours, a part of Toby knew that wasn't the full answer. A part of him had kept track of the fact that Chad wasn't the only one that had been eating all of that greasy food over the last year or more. It was the same part of his mind that briefly noted the cool breeze brushing against the fur of his torso that jutted out beneath his shirt even after he had finished stretching his arms over his head. Toby took a running step and leaped into the air, aiming for the beanbag chair beside Chad though evidently missed timed the jump, nearly missing the beanbag entirely as his rump barely landed on the back edge of the beanbag. Toby shot his arms out to stop himself from falling over backward, but Chad reached out a hand and pressed up on his back, sliding him forward into his seat.

"Thanks," Toby said, pulling out his large carton of fries and setting it on the ground between the two. Chad handed Toby a controller and grabbed a handful of fries. "Hey!"

"Hey, I bought these, remember," Chad teased through his chomping maw before turning his attention back to the screen. "Oh also, there's going to be a party at Alpha Rho Tau on Friday and you should definitely come!"

"Are you still trying to join that fraternity?"

"It's not a fraternity, it's an art-based honors society," Chad said.

"It's on Greek Row."

"Fine it's a fraternity, but you know it's not like those ones you see in the movies. It's not like Sigma Alpha Epsilon. It's usually much more chill..." Chad said with a relaxed Californian surfer accent.

“Is that how you’re going to talk once you join the art crew?” Toby teased.

“No,” Chad said unsurely. “Why, does it sound fake? Anyway, I need a wingman for...”

“For beer pong?”

“I was going to say for your company, but please please please will you team up with me for beer pong!?!? I think if we can get a convincing win against the Tousont Brothers, they’ll let me in for sure!”

“Alright,” Toby chuckled; he did owe Chad a favor after the talk they just had. Toby wasn’t much of a drinker or partier, but as Chad had started to rush for the Alpha Rho Tau, he had dragged Toby along with him to some of the gatherings at the frat house. The parties weren’t anything too crazy, mostly just a bunch of artists in their colorful berets painting on canvases, or each other, while sipping drinks, but every once and a while, usually after a round of exams, they would have all out parties. The last time they went, Toby had inadvertently gotten roped into a beer pong game and won four games straight, at one point knocking out eight cups in a row; apparently he was a savant at it, likely from his years harvesting on the farm and tossing different species of carrots across rows of crops into their respective harvesting bins.

“Thanks, dude!” Chad said, turning his attention back to the game flashing to life on the television screen before them. “Now remember Toby, you’re supposed to shoot the bad guys, not me when I’m about to complete the objective!”

“That was one time, and it was only because I sneezed when I was sniping the heavy that was charging up behind you.”

“Oh sure, blame it on the sneeze...” Chad teased as the two settled in for a much needed late night of gaming.



JUNIOR YEAR

“How, *huff, much, *groan, farther?” Chad moaned as his paws fell heavily on the pavement. His legs felt like lead forcing the feline to grunt as he struggled to lift them before letting them simply plop back down to earth a foot forward on the sidewalk. The technique was a far stretch from the active leg cycling he had trained to do much of his life. Well, trained until a few years ago.

“Just ano... *huff, anoth... *grunt, another lap around the block,” Toby called over his shoulder.

“You said that *grunt, three blocks ago,” Chad muttered under his breath. His thighs burned deeper than the feline ever thought they had before while his lungs struggled to suck in the crisp early fall air. He hated this. He wasn’t having fun and part of him wondered how he had had fun doing this for some many years though he was well aware of what that answer was: running itself had grown more difficult.

As the cheetah wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, he remembered back to when Toby had begun to point out the fact that the feline wasn’t looking as spry as he once had. It kind of a came as a shock to the feline, who had spent his whole life as thin as a rail without giving a second thought to his physique; perhaps it was the hubris of a great metabolism and an active sporting high school career? He had never worried much about what he ate or anything like that growing up, simply eating because food

tasted good and once he got to college he could finally indulge in all of his favorites without having his parents, specifically his mother, trying to force all of that Brussel sprouts and whole grain nonsense down his throat. At Tallow, he didn't get scolded if he ate pizza for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and he could go days without drinking a glass of water, instead, relying on the far superior carbonated beverages that had once been just a treat in his household growing up.

Chad grunted as he felt his legs starting to wobble, his muscles seemingly turning into jelly as they decided on their own that it was time to stop; they couldn't handle the beating any longer. Chad came to a stumbling stop, immediately hunching over at the knees to catch his breath but even that seemed to strain his burning thighs. Huffing, he leaned against a street sign jutting out of the sidewalk. Once he felt that support he leaned his entire weight against it, trying to relieve his legs as much as possible. He was so tired and sweaty that he barely noticed that the sign began to bend under the pressure, the flimsy iron bar designed to hold up a No Parking sign and not the hefty weight of an out of shape cheetah. Chad wiped his brow and tried to catch his breath. He glanced down and saw the cause of his running struggles: a thick, pale-furred gut jutting out from beneath his running shirt. As he looked he could feel soft flesh compressing along his neck and up against his chin, as well as the subtle bumps of spotted fur starting to peak up in the bottom of his periphery: his soft cheeks.

The cheetah felt like he should have seen all of this weight coming, that he should have known that eating at the Grille ten times a week was going to add those extra inches to his bulbous calves, rounded his hips, and plumped up his soft rear. He should have known that he would outgrow much of the size small clothing he had brought to college over two years ago and taken the hint when last year he had gone up a size and this year, just a month ago, he had gone up another two sizes for his back to school clothes shopping.

He should have noticed that heavy, lethargic feeling he felt while simply walking around his dorm or campus was not just the result of a lack of sleep but all those extra pounds caking onto his neglected muscles. He should have taken the hint when the other aspiring artists in his fraternity had started calling him Big Spots not just because of his signature style during their abstract themed painting nights. Chad knew he should have realized he was getting fat. The process, the weight gain, had just been so subtle. It had seemingly crept up on not just him, but Toby too.

As the feline caught his breath, Chad watched as Toby ran ahead of him, well, plodded ahead of him. His once athletic friend was now anything but. A thick plump rear jutted out his backside, merging slightly with a pair of thick haunches and a rounded side that was lined with engorged love handles. The bunny's own shirt rode up his beach ball sized gut, exposing to the world the mound of lard-incarnate as

it jolted up and down with each of the bunny's stomping steps. Chad watched the series of ripples cascade across Toby's frame as his weight fell hard on each of his paws, causing a set of boobs jutting out of his chest to bounce, his jello-like triceps and shoulders to wobble, and the jowls jutting out the side of his face to jiggle. The bunny was easily twice, if not more, as wide as he once was and likely weighed the same, if not more.

Chad knew he should have noticed Toby packing on the pounds, but when he saw the bunny each and every day, it was hard to notice a new extra pound here and there, the image of the bunny constantly updating in his mind until Toby had started mentioning feeling bloated and clumsy in the middle of their sophomore year. Chad had initially brushed those thoughts away, not wanting to recognize the fact that he too had started to feel weighed down seemingly by his own body, but as the weeks and months had progressed, Toby had started mentioning more and more about tight clothes and the fact that neither of them had stepped foot in the new gym that had opened up at the start of the year.

Finally, one day in the middle of the summer when the two of them had been gorging on a pair of pizzas a piece, Toby had come right out and said it: they were both fat. Beyond the freshman-fifteen kind of fat: they were obese. It was that moment that shattered the veil of denial for the cheetah and he noticed just how broad and looming his roommate had become, the towering bunny now seemingly blotting out the sun and the world when they stood next to each other with his bulbous girth: a mountain of rabbit pudge.

It had been Toby that had suggested they start running again, an idea that Chad, in retrospect, thought he probably should have been the one to float. Why hadn't he? He had always been the more active one of the two and had always been the one dragging Toby into shenanigans and ventures, not the other way around; it was an odd change of pace. They had started running regularly just last week and though Chad intuitively knew that it was going to be difficult, having not run for over two years, he had grossly underestimated just how out of shape he had gotten. He had always been the hyperactive one in high school, jumping at the bit to get up and move about, but now he didn't want that. All he wanted to do, the second he started running, was sit. In fact, in recent months he had started to avoid walking as much as he could. He just felt so slow, heavy, and tired, like his once sporadic, though passionate focus, had been subdued by his recent greasy indulgences and dedication to his art. He didn't want to run a 1500m race anymore, he wanted to grab some chicken nuggets and paint a sunset mountain scene!

Chad knew that he should keep up with his running, despite the seemingly lack of progress in his fitness over the last fourteen days, but a louder part of him simply didn't want to. A part of him didn't want to put his body through such agonizing hardship that was a simple two-mile run around campus. A

part of him wondered why he even needed to in the first place. A part of him wondered just what was so bad about a few extra pounds on his waist anyway. A part of him kind of liked the f... Chad noticed Toby slowing to a stop just up the street from him, Chad figured this was his chance to catch back up and despite all the warning signs in his mind, he pushed off the signpost and half jogged, half stumbled up to the bunny.

Toby was wheezing louder than he had ever heard the bunny wheeze, like the act of simply catching his breath, was in it of itself making him out of breath. Chad put a reassuring hand on Toby's back.

"You good, dude?" Chad huffed.

"Yeah, *huff, I just need a, *grunt, sec," Toby said, resting his hands on his knees, a difficult task as his stomach pressed heavily against his thighs and mold around the contours of his arms as it bulged forward and down toward the pavement below; a victim to the will of gravity.

"I think we've ran enough for today," Chad said. Toby glanced down at his phone and saw that the two had barely run a mile, even less than they had run just two days ago. Toby wanted to protest, to encourage the two of them to get at least another half a mile in, but the burning of his legs convinced him otherwise. He was exhaust. Hot and exhausted.

"Yeah," Toby said. "You're probably right. Besides, I need to read two chapters before class tomorrow..."

"Same," Chad said.

"Want to try the Wayside Forest route on Thursday?" Toby asked.

"I can't, I have a meeting with my advisor and a fundraiser for Alpha Rho Tau in the afternoon. How about Friday?"

"I have my TA office hours and my thermodynamics lab then," Toby said. "Saturday?"

"We're going apple picking with the guys, remember?" Chad said.

"Yeah," Toby sighed, "you're right."

"Don't worry, dude," Chad said, helping Toby up as the two began to walk back to their dorm. "We'll find time."

"Yeah, definitely," Toby said, despite how empty that promise felt. The bunny immediately scolded himself as he tried to squash that sense of uncertainty in his mind: *Of course they would find a time! It'd be just like when they were in high school. So what if they were starting to get busier now that the school was getting into full swing? They could still find time to run... no, they WOULD find a time to*

run! Exercise was important to them, even if they had neglected it for the last two years, right? They could break that lethargic habit, right? Of course, because they were motivated! They could do this!

Still, as thoughts swirled around Toby tired mind, he still couldn't shake that nagging feeling from deep within his gut that poked through that mindset:

Doubt.



SENIOR YEAR

Toby grunted as he stood up from his seat. He immediately felt his weight shift forward and toward the ground and braced himself with his thighs and hamstrings to prevent his billowing gut from pulling him forward and toppling into the row of chairs, and their accompanying furs, in front of him. Still, in the tight aisle, his belly pressed up against the back the chair in front of him, causing the ocelot sitting there to turn and give the bunny and sideways glare; Toby didn't care though. He was too excited and happy to care. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash yellow and black to his right and saw that the row was starting to move. He took a few small steps in place, swinging his girth around and following the line with a huff.

He had done it, he had graduated from college and not just that, he had done so with Latin honors. All those years of studying late into the night and all those times that he succumbed to Chad's peer pressure and chugged cans of energy drinks to give him the boost he needed to finish his capstone project had paid off. They had paid off for the feline waddling down the row in front of him too. Chad had graduated near the top of his art class thanks in part to his senior project, "Essence of Food" which had won the covet Pablo Picasofrita Distinguished Gallery Award. The two of them were a formidable

academic duo even if the first thing their peers saw of them was their thick, bulging bellies; quite literally. The graduation gowns they both donned far too small to contain their respective girths despite the fact they were the largest size available. Neither really minded though; their minds were set toward the future.

As Toby and Chad stood in line at the edge of the stage, Toby stared at his friend's backside and noted the familiar sight from their graduation only four years ago. Of course, now, the cheetah wasn't bouncing up and down with giddy glee. Instead, Toby could hear the feline's heavy breath and a soft gurgle emanating from his middle; he was hungry. Of course, Chad was always hungry nowadays, as was Toby himself, making the too ever the more anxious for the ceremony to finish and the fully catered reception to start. Chad's graduation robe hung loosely around his sides, the open exposed to show his undersized shirt and his belly protruding forth. The cheetah was nearly three times as wide as the last time he had donned a graduation gown, sporting several hundred pounds of blubber that were caked to his stocky legs, billowing belly, pillowy arms, and chunky cheeks.

Toby remembered a time during the early weeks of their junior year when they had first started trying to do something about their ballooning collegiate bodies. The weight had seemingly just caught up to him, probably a reason why they had a phrase referring to the freshman fifteen. Toby hadn't known why he hadn't noticed his lack of exercise or the noticed the consequences of his objectively poor diet, but his sudden realization of his weight after tripping in his room and bouncing off his stomach instead of landing flat on his face was enough to clue him into that flabby fact. Sure, he had meant well when he wanted to start exercising again to drop some of the weight, but once classes picked up and his mind became hyperfocused on his work again, those runs became few and far between and the gym once again joined that group of buildings on campus that only entered his mind when a passing prospective student and their family were asking for direction. Why they would ask him and his blubbery physique such a question was beyond Toby, but perhaps it was his approachable demeanor and adorable dimpled smile?

It had been on those occasions, that reminded Toby of his growing weight and days he'd shuffled back into his apartment with a disappointed look over his face, a look that Chad would immediately pick up on. When Toby voiced his concerns for his weight, well both of their weights, Chad would jump right in with talk of body positivity that Toby knew the feline had learned from his student affairs works through his fraternity. Though Toby knew it was prepackaged advice, Chad add a little flair beyond the metaphorical bullet points, points that resonated with Toby: was the weight all that bad? The long winters at Tallow University had steadily grown more tolerable over the years, even with record low temperatures

and a record number of blizzards, and there was something pleasant about feeling one's own personal blanket of fat constantly hugging them in a comforting and reassuring squeeze.

There was something else to it too, however: Toby liked feeling big. The bunny kind of like the sensation of simply taking up more and more space with his bulk, requiring more than one chair in certain lecture halls and forcing others to create a wide walking birth around his girth on the sidewalks. He had never been the most boisterous or outgoing fur his entire life, but it was kind of nice putting himself out there, literally. It also seemed to fill that childhood void spawn by the simple fact that he was, despite his objectively stall stature, the runt of his family. Feeling big was an important sensation to the bunny, one that he didn't realize was so important until he was filling out the mattress on his bed and struggling to squeeze into the dorm showers.

Sure, Toby had reservations about meeting up with his parents at graduation and though they were surprised, to put it lightly, at Toby's new bulk, they were more excited for the occasion and Toby's future plans. Though Toby had always wanted nothing more than to return home and help his family at the farm, after diving into his engineering degree, he fell in love with designing farm equipment itself and after taking an elective business class with his cheetah companion, he realized he could merge that passion with his familial passion. On top of finishing out their classes and senior projects, Toby and Chad had been spending a fair amount of time coming up with a business plan for a company they were going to file paperwork for as soon as the graduation festivities were over: Functional Agricultural Technologies.

The company was going to be a non-profit organization that helped provide family farmers with innovative technology to allow them to compete with their industrial counterparts. Toby would work on the design end, developing the technologies that he knew would help out families like his own while Chad would help run the outreach branch of the company. With his personable experiences in his fraternity and student affairs as well as with his artistic and marketing skills, Toby knew the cheetah would be more than capable of getting their organization's name out into the world. They had big dreams of empowering the small time players in the agricultural space that help keep the communities that they called home growing up together and thriving. Sure it was going to be a risky venture as all startups were, especially non-profits, but they were young and full of passion and grit (not to mention grits from that morning's breakfast). The future was bright for the two and all they needed to do was get through the next ninety seconds.

"Chad Abara!" the dean called on stage. With a giddy speed that Toby hadn't seen in years, Chad rushed up the stage, his entire body shaking and sloshing as his heavy footsteps pounded on the staging

beneath his feet. He grabbed his diploma, posed for his photo and stood by the edge of the stage. Toby's heart fluttered: this was it!

"Toby Thompson!" the dean called. Toby grunted as he ascended the stairs, his feeble leg muscles struggling to move his bulk, but he didn't need to go far. He loomed over the dean who almost cowered as the bunny stood next to him, grabbing his diploma and smiling toward the professional photographer. Toby then waddled across the stage and joined Chad as they posed for Chad's mom who had somehow snuck along the edge of the crowd for a surprise, and definitely unauthorized photo.

"Smile boys!" she said as the two friends hugged each other's sides and grinned. They had done it. They had graduated. Now the world was their oyster and that thought both excited them as well as caused their bellies to loudly rumble.

They hoped there were going to be oysters at the reception...



EPILOGUE: POST-GRAD

Happy. Happy was all that Toby felt. Why would he feel any other way? Everything in his life was falling into place, so he was happy. Oh so happy.

It had been a year since the Toby and Chad had graduated and their start-up Functional Agricultural Technologies was starting to take off. After graduation, while Chad worked on graphics and marketing material for the company, Toby had put the finishing touches on an old equipment design he had starting coming up with during his sophomore year: The Selective Root Vegetable Harvester. The tractor attachment would allow farmers to harvest only the ripest carrots, potatoes, and onions while leaving behind their smaller, growing counterparts. This could save thousands of labor hours doing that process by hand and could actually allow for a higher crop density as farmers timed their crop yields, having stages of growth of the plants so that they could harvest a complete crop in a third of the time as usual. It was a poised to be a revolutionary product and after collecting some preliminary data from the prototype Toby had his own family acquire, they instantly got pre-orders from other farmers in the area.

With those initial sales, the duo used their profits to then subsidize the purchase of the Selective Root Vegetable Harvester for farmers who couldn't afford them, occasionally providing the equipment

for free. Toby allowed Chad to run those outreach ventures as he helped organize community-wide “paint” sessions to bring the community of farmers together to paint their Harvesters and tractors to show pride for their profession and community. Of course, some of the other, commercial farms wanted access to the new equipment, but by limiting the number of units that they would provide per customer, they made sure that the small farms always had a leg up in proportion to their farm size on their bigger competitors. Sure they could have been making more money if they relaxed those rationing rules, but that wasn’t the point of this venture; it was about something bigger than that. The two were happy; busy but happy.

Just like in college, they had many a long night working on new outreach events and designing new equipment and as such, they found themselves still eating more and more of all of those fast food goodies that they had for the past few years. Pizzas, take-out, burgers, and sodas fueled their ventures and as such their waistlines too. Their bodies swelled, their bellies falling down toward their knees and their thighs merging with their calves into single stalks of pudge. Their arms grew heavy and bloated while their heads seemingly sunk into the rising flesh of their moobs and the bloating flesh of their pudgy necks. They quickly went from being fat to obese and beyond and neither seemed to care.

Why bother or get worked up over a few extra pounds when they were empowering the communities they cared so much about? What was wrong with a little bit of pudge when a family could finally harvest enough food to put their own kids through college? Why waste money on heating in the winter when their blubbery bulks created enough radiant heat, using that money instead to sell one more Harvester to a struggling farm in need? Why stress about fat when they were giving their friends, family, and community the economic independence and viability that they had all dreamed of?

Chad and Toby were doing good things and enjoying themselves for it, blubber and all, and there was nothing, not even the loss of their mobility, that was going to slow them down!