

The Lord of the Grill

Jake the jackal scooted his chair away from his desk for a brief, but much needed rest. Homework could wait, he needed to unfocus his eyes and unwind for a moment. Taking a breather to find his center was always one of his favorite bits of exerting himself, physically or mentally. After exhausting his energy, he found even the smallest act of respite extremely rewarding. It was something he applied to almost every problem in his life. When a harrowing situation came his way, he found a way to dodge it, find himself again with a rest earned from sheer effort, and push forward stronger than before.

One of his favorite techniques was to simply turn his gaze off into the distance after being blinkered at a desk for hours, relishing the sensation of his eyes loosening up and relaxing. He didn't invent this practice, of course, but it still felt special to him.

His university courses were beginning to take a toll on him. The mounting pressure of his homework assignment was getting too great, so it was time for another of his mental pickmeups. As he stood up, he suddenly recalled a similar event back in his high school days. He remembered one of his prouder moments, the two-hundred meter state track championship race.

As if he were right there in the moment again, he felt the frozen air wickedly grasping into his lungs like needles, and the athletes from the rival school casting an intimidating presence over the entire stadium. Undaunted, he returned to his old standby, the well deserved break earned through effort, cleared his head and got into the game. A brief moment of

isolating himself from the source of stress by focusing on a comforting thought was all it took. The black-backed jackal sped down the track like a rocket, his lean, powerful form maximizing every last ounce of force in his running technique.

While running, he noticed a particular face in the crowd, accompanied by a vulgar, but good hearted voice.

"Fuck 'em up, Jake!" The slightly pudgy monitor lizard shouted vigorously. Walter had been one of Jake's best friends since the sixth grade, and the two were inseparable. Just thinking back to their exhilarating and nearly fatal adventures together in urban exploration and mountain climbing filled Jake with a strange warmth and comfort he didn't really understand. He did however feel his efforts bolstered and pressed onward.

He finished in second place by a nose, but he didn't mind. He had shattered his own personal record and made a respectable effort to the represent his school. Almost as soon as the race ended, he was suddenly struck by the realization that highschool, and subsequently the track team, was now essentially over and that he'd have to find a new structure in life to adhere to. Thoughts of what would come next raced through his head and threatened to overwhelm him. Troubled, he rationalized that he had earned a nice snack at the very least. His last semester was over. That deserved a treat, he thought, nodding to himself.

Jake put away the nostalgia goggles and returned to the present. He had worked hard on his assignments, but reached his limit. He needed to unwind. He took a long sip from his vegetable smoothie and decided to take a brief "walk" through the college dorm room. He often joked with his roommate that the square footage could be counted on one hand, though in all honesty it wasn't that bad.

He spotted Walter lounging on the couch, reading something for his English class. A small pile of cheeto crumbs and hamburger wrappers surrounded him. Walter had always carried a few extra pounds around the middle as long as Jake knew him, but the college diet had really taken its toll on his body.

Where once had been a modest, if well-fed, scaly tummy, two year's worth of late night snacking and feverish binging on fast food had built it solidly into a full blown gut. His belly bore the size and weight of a medicine ball, bulging off of him like a lead weight as he lay on his side. Walter was already generally quite large, and all the extra weight he'd been packing on was seriously rounding out his figure.

"Hey, Walter, do you know what the quiz on Monday's about?"

The monitor lizard unceremoniously swallowed a double cheeseburger in two quick bites, licking a bit of sauce off his claw before replying. The wrapper didn't have any markings on it, but Jake recognized the paper. It came from a local place around here that supposedly had amazing burgers, along with terrible branding. The actual restaurant didn't even officially have a name, it was just commonly referred to as "the burger place" or some variation of it. It's still running after being established in the 1920s and widely considered a point of pride to the college community.

"Chapter four. Just the first thirty pages of it, I think."

"Cool, thanks."

Jake took a closer look at his roommate. The sight of Walter's belly spilling off to his side made him feel concerned for his friend's health as usual, but also a strangely intriguing feeling that didn't quite consciously register to him.

"Hey, wanna hit up the grocery store? I'm getting tired of takeout."

"Eh, if you want. Personally, I'd be good with this forever."

Walter chomps another burger and turns the page in his book. Jake shifted his weight uncomfortably. He had never been good at confrontations, even very minor ones. The best he could usually manage was trying to redirect a conversation in a roundabout way.

He was worried for his best friend's well being, but he wasn't sure what he could do about it. Trying to appeal on financial grounds wouldn't work either. The two of them had won an essay writing contest the local burger place held in partnership with the university. The grand prize was a scholarship and a lifetime supply of burgers, of course. Walter happily took advantage of both. The results of this were clear, hanging off the lizard's heavy waist.

"A little variety is good sometimes." said Jake.

Walter shrugged, and drained half a soda can.

"What are you up to? I thought you had that history paper due in a couple hours."

Jake's stomach grumbled loudly. He put a paw over his trim abdomen as if to shush it.

Walter raised an eyebrow.

"I was getting overwhelmed. Had to take a break."

"Sounds like you didn't get enough lunch. Want a burger?"

Walter offered him one from his enormous pile. He pulled open the grease stained paper and the delectable, rustic scent of beef overcomes Jake. He's visibly taken aback.

"Umm, no thanks. I have to save food like that for special occasions."

"Aww, C'moon!" Walter luridly waved the burger under Jake's nose. The smell became overpowering, and his traitorous stomach chose that exact moment to angrily gurgle in hunger, eliciting a blush from the jackal.

"N... No thanks."

Walter leaned in and patted him on the middle.

"You're tired, overworked, hungry, and stuck. Take a little break."

Jake eyed the hamburger hungrily, his expression contorting from the internal battle.

"You've earned it." He continued, a mischievous glimmer flickered in his eyes.

"I guess I did."

Jake relented, and took a hearty bite of the burger. It was even more delicious than the aroma had suggested. He was overcome by an explosion of rich beefy flavor, the freshly baked bun gently soaked in meat juices, and the cheese providing a subtle but essential note to the flavor as a whole. The experience cast his memories of his typical healthy meals in a rather pathetic light by comparison.

Walter leaned in, a toothy grin crossing his face.

"So what do you think? Good, yeah?"

Jake gave into his intense hunger and the burger seemed to vanish into his belly before he even noticed.

"Looks like it." he continued. "Feeling better? Gonna finish that assignment?"

"Oh yeah. Amazing! I feel ready to write an encyclopedia."

"Hell yeah."

"Well I'd better get back to it, thanks for the burg."

Jake bounded off back to his desk, energized and ready to roll. Walter grinned watching him run, seeing that tail wag with such excitement. Miraculously, Jake managed to hurdle the roadblock keeping him from finishing his assignment. He decided to chalk this success up to his friend for his wonderful encouragement.

He licked his muzzle as thoughts of that delicious hamburger came drifting back.

Jake woke up early the next morning. Walter was still passed out like a log on the lower bunk. He took care to descend the ladder quietly, but he made a slight misstep. Walter jostled a bit in his sleep, tossing his covers partially off, leaving his belly bare for all to see. Jake hadn't seen his roommate's middle uncovered like this since they went on that beach trip more than a year ago. Seeing his vast, round dome of a gut rise and fall with his breathing, it suddenly struck him just how much weight he'd packed on.

He made his way to the bathroom and got disrobed for the shower. He took a look at himself in the mirror. Yup, still fit, lean and trim, even got some nice muscle tone going on. A little short in his opinion, but still the model of health. He did a few poses, admiring the fruits of his discipline. He then thought of his friend and the piles of cheeseburgers he had on the regular and swore that he could never allow himself to lose control of his appetite like that.

Walter woke up shortly after his shower. He offered Jake a plate of cheeseburgers for breakfast. Without thinking, Jake quickly accepted it and what he had done didn't even register until he had taken a delicious bite.

"W-wait, no! I can't have this for breakfast, that's just not right."

"Why not?"

"It's a lunch food, not a breakfast food. I dunno."

"Food is food. When you want it, you want it."

"No, that doesn't - nevermind. Thank you for the offer, but I think I'm gonna have to swear off these for good."

"Aww man, you sure about that? I loved having a burger buddy to eat with."

Genuine concern poured out from Walter's demeanor, but Jake seemed to miss it, possibly mistaking it for sarcasm.

"Absolutely. No more. I don't wanna end up like... I just need to be able to run."

A slight twinge of sadness crossed Walter's features, somehow deflating the hefty reptile, but he quickly hid it.

"Okaaay, if you say so."

The monitor lizard slid the plate of burgers back toward himself. Jake reflexively reached for them before catching himself. Walter chuckled.

"Well alright then."

He takes a big bite of his burger and grins.

"I hope you hold out as long as possible."

Within a month, the promise he made to himself was broken. Jake started to make some unhealthy new habits. It started small, as most things do. When he encountered a roadblock on a major assignment or stressful cramming before a test, he picked up a hamburger to help take the edge off. Sometimes two. He found himself craving them at strange times, outside of his usual planned mealtimes. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for him, the burger joint was always open, 24/7.

The hamburger ritual became a regular thing. He hadn't forgotten the decree he had made in front of Walter. To get his fix, he had to resort to some trickery. Since Walter spent so much time going in and out of the restaurant, he couldn't risk being seen there unless he was certain the coast was clear. Otherwise, he had to don disguises to keep his secret safe. On the plus side, Jake now had a very wide selection of hoodies to keep him warm in the winter.

He didn't notice himself, but his new meals were already starting to add up on his waistline. A trace layer of pudge covered his abs, covering up the bit of definition he had there, and his rump grew the faintest hint of additional softness, slightly rounding out the muscular features.

A month later, Jake was walking back home from his evening class. He had to adjust his belt a couple times, as a few pairs of pants must have started shrinking in the wash. He blamed the new detergent they tried.

Unbeknownst to him, his constant stream of hamburgers was slowly but surely adding weight to his frame. If it ever occurred to him to closely check his full body in the mirror again, he would have noticed that he had already put on a slightly rounded little tummy, pushing softly outward about two inches more than he imagined. Perhaps it was unconscious,

willful disbelief, but whenever he saw his stomach bulging out a bit more convexly than he wanted, he chalked it up to catching a look at himself inhaling, or just a little bit of bloating.

While walking home, he found his usual route blocked. A bridge, the only one connecting the campus to his dorm, was shut down to all traffic for emergency renovations.

His first instinct was to curse his bad fortune, but some part of him was glad. This late at night, the hamburger place was the only food available, and it must have been *hours* since he last ate...

As the weeks crawled by, Jake's cheeseburger problem continued to grow, just as he did. By this point, his problem-coping techniques had been fully corrupted beyond any use. He was now taking every slight inconvenience and minor problem as an excuse to feed his hungry gut. His need to maintain control over his life was at odds with these powerful new cravings that seemed to take that control away.

Every day, Walter still brought a few bags of cheeseburgers home to munch on throughout the evening. It took Jake every remaining ounce of willpower he had to keep his paws off them.

"Hey Jake, you ever change your mind about burgin'? I could totally do some burgin' with you."

"Nah, none of that for me, can't stand that stuff anymore." Jake grimaced.

"Suit yourself." Walter shrugged and took a big meaty bite out of his triple cheeseburger while Jake glared in silent jealousy.

Jake's weight had continued to climb. The jackal's tummy had rounded out into a significant feature on his abdomen, to the point that he couldn't possibly deny it to himself anymore. He found sitting down was the worst, as it caused his belly to pooch forward a couple inches, easily overtaking the waistband of his pants. His rump trailed behind but still saw some growth too, he could tell it had become larger, softening enough to be grabbable between fingers. He became very self conscious about his belly, and found himself wearing loose clothing in an attempt to hide it and sucking in his gut as much as possible when around anyone, especially Walter. It made getting around the dorm an exercise in endurance.

After a few painful hours of holding his stomach in while Walter was with him at the dorm, Jake decided then and there that he would need to conceal the effects of his eating habits for as long as he possibly could. He knew that denying a home in his mind for self-defeating thoughts was a valuable and effective technique, after all, having great faith in oneself can inspire a person to accomplish great things ordinarily beyond their reach. He figured that if he convinced himself and others that he didn't have a problem, and in fact remained a master of discipline, that he would be able to muster up the mental fortitude to break this hamburger-shaped slump he found himself in.

One morning, Jake attempted to take control and quit the hamburgers all together, cold turkey style. He felt quite good about himself for the first few hours for defeating his demons. When the hunger pangs came, he managed to assuage them partially with his old standby meals and snacks, things like nuts and steamed vegetables. By the time the sun went down, however, it was getting a lot more difficult. The cravings were becoming unbearable, invading his thoughts, urging him to consume.

That night, In the middle of his eight o'clock chemistry lecture, Jake's stomach let out an ear piercing **gruuuumble**, earning him some puzzled stares from the rest of the class, as well as the professor, a white bearded dragon wearing oversized bifocals.

"Ha! Your stomach is clearly enthralled by the idea of gas-phase reactions. I wish the rest of you would show as much enthusiasm."

He pointed to Jake, and all the heads in the room turned to follow.

"This is a great opportunity here. What's your name? Come on up here, show me what's wrong with this equation on the board."

Jake was heavily flustered by the attention, dreading the thought of facing any more.

"Um, I don't...

GROOOOAN

His stomach roared out again, even louder this time. Jake was suddenly wracked with hunger the likes of which he had never experienced before. His stomach demanded to be fed a mountain of food, and it demanded it right now.

"Excuse me, I... I have to leave."

Jake blushed a bright crimson as he hurriedly gathered up his things and ran out the door, clutching his aching belly. He made a mad dash to the burger place.

Slamming the door open, panting heavily, he entered the restaurant

"I need thirty of the number threes, please!" He blurted out without really thinking.

The number he asked for felt outrageous, yet somehow not at the same time. Some desperate

part of him wanted go along with it. Also, he suddenly realized how rude it was to barge in like that.

Jake blushed and apologized for the scene he caused.

The bear behind the counter gave Jake a slightly puzzled look before leaning back into a shrug. "Was this something he's seen before?" Jake wondered briefly, until the intense hunger pangs shocked him into focusing on the matter at hand.

After an agonizing wait, Jake thanked the owner and accepted his treasure. There was too much to fit in one typical to go bag, he was forced to fill his backpack to the brim and carry two overloaded grocery bags under each arm.

Jake made a mad dash back to his dorm as fast as he possibly could. He knew Walter was going to be out of the dorm today interviewing for an internship and running some errands until early the next morning. That meant he could feast on his ridiculous meal in peace.

Running was definitely getting more difficult, and he couldn't help but make the connection with what he was carrying, but he found himself unable to properly consider it in the face of this pressing, primal need. When he finally arrived back in his dorm, his stomach felt like it was ready to revolt. He tossed his school things to the floor and immediately tore into his burger hoard at the counter, not even bothering to get a chair.

The first bite was pure bliss, immediately confirming that he had made the right decision. One after another, he shoveled them into his maw with an unbridled ferocity. He could feel each one land heavily in his gut, each one swelling and tightening his belly out just a bit more.

A sharp pain in his side gave him pause until he finally puzzled out what was causing it.

His belt had become too restrictive and it had to go. With a pained grunt, he managed to unfasten it and toss it aside. His overfilled belly immediately surged outward, unconfined by its prison.

Still, he wasn't done yet. Amazingly, he had gluttonously attacked his way through nearly all of the cheeseburgers, but two remained uneaten. He glanced down at his bloated tummy. He noticed that he was so full that his belly had taken on an almost spherical shape, bulging out nearly to the size of a basketball. The fur on his middle was visibly thinner where the skin stretched.

His mind was telling him to stop, but his stomach commanded him to finish the meal. The bloated jackal took a deep breath and slammed the last two burgers one after another and took them in with a hard swallow. Like a delicious bomb going off, his belly managed one last gurgling bulge to close out the meal. Jake heard a sharp **pop** noise followed by a **zrrrp** sound and looked down, finding that his gut had blasted the button open on his pants and forced the zipper all the way down to the open position.

Jake groaned, overcome with the tremendous tightness in his middle. He could definitely feel the immense weight pulling his swollen gut outward and downward. He flopped on his back triumphantly. He could not think of another moment in his life where he felt so supremely full and content. It sounded ridiculous in his head and went against everything he thought he believed, but something about this unique sensation felt very very right.

He had to take a moment to take stock of the situation. How had he, an athlete, managed to fit thirty hamburgers (and assorted sides) into himself? The terrifying thing was that his stomach now felt perfectly content, as if this is what it will demand from him from now on. Maybe trying to quit cold turkey wasn't a good idea after all.

He sighed and took a closer look at his belly. Especially when laying flat on his back like this, it looked like a balloon. He had never been so... round before. Definitely bigger even than Walter was a couple years ago.

"At least it's just a bloat and it won't stay this way." he consoled himself half heartedly.

He spent the next several minutes just resting on the floor, beginning the colossal task of digesting his obscenely large meal, until a terrifying noise startled him into a cold sweat: footsteps. Specifically, Walter's footsteps. He could recognize the stomping, carefree gait anywhere, plus it was coming straight for him.

With a herculean effort, Jake forced himself back to his feet despite his boulder-like belly doing its best to stop him. He scrambled to stuff all the wrappers and burger paraphernalia into the trash, the bags, and anywhere that could hide them.

With the countertop and surrounding area clean, he felt safe for a few seconds, until it dawned on him that he was carrying a bellyful of fattening treats that he had proclaimed he would have nothing to do with. He had to hide it, he couldn't bear the thought of disappointing Walter with his weak discipline.

Frantically, the jackal rushed to find anything to cover his engorged belly, finding nothing large enough in the immediate vicinity except for the kitchen counter and maybe the grocery bags.

The footsteps grew louder and he had to make a decision fast. He bolted to the other side of the counter and grabbed the bags on the way. He had to lean forward against the counter in a slightly awkward position to make sure his belly stayed out of view. He figured he could act natural there until an opportunity arose and use the bags to cover his escape to his

desk.

The doorknob turned and Walter walked in, about seven hours ahead of schedule.

"Hey Walter, you're early?" Jake asked in a decidedly unsmooth way.

Walter gently set his things down and tossed his coat on the couch.

"Oh, yeah. Apparently the place I was going to interview at got immediately shut down by a court order about 20 minutes before I got there? So that put the kibosh on that. My jury duty summons ended up not happening too, I don't really understand how that works but I'll take it, and the other stuff wasn't too hard, just helping my brother move some stuff across town."

Jake stifled a massive burp, sending more pressure into his gut.

"How about you? What's new with you?"

"Oh, not much. Just got back from chem class, doing some unwinding."

"Ah, Dr. Lout. Always good for a laugh."

Walter finished putting his keys and wallet down and noticed something across the room on the floor.

"Hey is that your belt?"

"Huh?"

"What's your belt doing on the floor?"

"No? Uh, I mean, I don't know? Must have tossed it over there while I was organizing the closet."

"Can you pick it up? I know I'm a slob but I don't wanna trip over things."

"Umm, sure."

Walter looked at him expectantly.

"Now?" Jake asked.

"Yes please."

"Could you bring it over to me? I'll put it away."

"I'm not your maid, dude."

"You're closer, I'll put it back with my stuff."

"Okay whatever, I concede. You win the belt war."

Walter picked up the belt and handed it to Jake, who grimaced as he leaned forward to press his gut even more tightly against the counter to keep it hidden.

Jake picked up the extra large grocery bags he had used to bring his haul in. He remembered that they were both still full of wrappers he would need to hide. He held them both out in front of him, concealing his swollen middle and crabwalked backwards around the corner to the closet area. From there he was able to stash them away under a pile of dirty laundry. Next, in one seamless motion, he bundled himself up with a thick blanket and flopped down at his desk, making it impossible to guess how large he was underneath. He realized he would have to remain here for hours until Walter went to sleep, but it was a price he was willing to pay.

Walter just stared with a look of befuddlement at the series of weird movements.

"You're kind of weird, you know that, right?"

"Nothin' wrong with being weird." Jake responded.

Walter chuckled and shook his head and went back to his own business.

Jake was acutely aware of how crazy he was acting, but still believed he had to press on. His sense of personal discipline was at stake here, which he had based a great deal of his entire identity on.

Sure, part of the reason was that he didn't want to admit to his best friend that he had a huge failure, but far more than that, getting caught and facing the consequences of his out of control eating habits had a finality to it that he couldn't bear to think about. Until he allowed that to happen, his problems seemed far more reversible. And besides, if he could maintain a spotless image despite the difficulties his... current condition, wouldn't that in itself be a great victory of self control?

Jake pondered this and other things as he waited for the night to end, nursing his sore stomach under his blanket.

It was three weeks later, and Jake's consumption levels kept steadily increasing. He managed to streamline his situation so that incidents like the thirty burger binge didn't happen again, but looking at the numbers, the total amount he's eating was spiralling out of control. Several triple burgers with all the sides for all three meals every day. Throwing in another couple for snacks at random times too, it all added up to a tremendous amount of food going straight to the jackal's belly.

And speaking of that binge, that was definitely the tipping point that convinced Jake he

needed to manage this business more seriously. He lost control and consumed tens of thousands of calories that night, and those calories had to go somewhere. In the first week after that, he suddenly bloated up by more than fifteen pounds, quite a lot for his small frame, making a good deal of his wardrobe unwearable.

Some part of Jake was fascinated by how he was changing, and simultaneously worried about what it portends for his future and his relationships. He had begun to accept that his weight was going to keep going up like a runaway train. Maybe he could delay some of the social consequences, but it seemed like that number was always destined to rise at some rate.

A Saturday morning came. He sighed and headed to the bathroom to check out the latest damages in the full length mirror. He took a look at his rump and found it had been significantly softened and rounded by the endless onslaught of fast food. With trepidation, he noticed a jiggle there when he walked, and he was able to grab a whole palmful of soft butt if he were so inclined. If he did not have what would be called a "booty" before, he guessed he might qualify now.

His thighs had plumped up a bit as well, though not nearly as much as other areas. Still, he started to find the chafing was a problem due to his thighs now being large enough to rub together. Their size made wearing a few articles of clothing a bit more difficult.

Jake checked out his face. This was the part he found hardest to accept. Disguising your gut and other assets with slimming clothing was one thing, but there aren't a lot of options for making your face look less fat. With a bit of dread, he checked out his cheeks, noting that they had grown outwards a bit, creating lots of new folds whenever he moved his face about. He could feel a double chin already setting up shop under his face.

His arms didn't make it out unscathed either. He could feel the same muscles he had

underneath there before, but their presence was concealed and softened. His arms were now encapsulated in a thin layer of extra padding, adding a slight pillowy quality to them.

Finally, it was time to evaluate the belly. There was no getting around it. He was fat. As much as he tried to deny it and hide it, it was really true now. His gut, even when completely empty, bulges out nearly to the size of a basketball. It seemed a majority of his fat found a home there, rounding his form out nicely into a classic potbelly. Taking a few steps around the bathroom, he noticed his gut had a fair amount of jiggle to it, but it seemed to want to move as a single large mass rather than ripple about. He gave it an experimental slap, committing the sensation to memory. Firm, but with a little give.

Jake's belly presented the biggest problem, both figuratively and literally. A great anxiety had been building up in his mind over the past couple weeks as his weight gain began to accelerate. He cupped his round, fleshy belly in his paws and stared forlornly at it. He felt as though he was right on the threshold of being able to pass for a thin (or, more likely, an average) person. He was certain that with just one more pound on his frame he would be unable to get away with hiding it with his usual tricks. He would have to deal with the consequences of being fat 24/7.

Jake dreaded the days to come. He felt like his core identity had been eroded away and was now about to be destroyed for good. He had a need to be in full control of his life, and yet he was being undone by a problem that he felt completely helpless to stop. One of these inevitably had to give in to the other at some point, and it looked like his belly finally won the battle for control.

Jake sighed and prepared to start the day. He and Walter both had the day off, and neither of them were in the mood for a grand adventure. Today was a day for staying in and

unwinding from the week's stress.

So of course Jake immediately began the tiring and stressful task of keeping his gut sucked in for hours at a time, desperately holding onto the illusion in hopes of it magically becoming true.

Walter put on a movie and the two of them sat together on the edge of the bunk bed to watch. It was one of Jake's favorites. Jake was having a great time and almost began to relax for real until an ominous gurgle from his stomach disrupted the moment.

While Jake was transfixed by the movie, Walter placed one of his cheeseburgers in his friend's hands. The jackal, with the hands of a practiced expert, instinctively found the ideal biting angle by touch alone, and swallowed it in two quick bites. Since he had spent so much time today hanging with Walter, he hadn't had a chance to get his usual fix. He moaned in pleasure from the awe-inspiring taste, but then yelped and jumped away from the bed in surprise when he remembered Walter was sitting right next to him.

Walter chuckled.

"You polished that off pretty quick. It's like you're an old hand at eating those things."

Jake waited in a cold sweat a few moments before attempting to divert the conversation away from its dangerous trajectory.

"It's not like you need a doctorate to eat a hamburger correctly."

"No, but it helps. I remember you swearing some kind of oath to keep away from the burger place's food. I know how seriously you take that sort of thing."

"And I kept it, up until you tricked me just now."

"Bullshit, man. You've been having more. A *lot* more."

"No way!"

"Then how do you explain that gut of yours?"

Jake froze, his thoughts raced in search of an escape route, but found nothing.

"I... uh. I don't have one."

"Look at me, man. I have experience with this sort of thing. I know what it looks like when the pounds start piling on."

Walter wobbled his own sizable belly for emphasis.

"Some things you just can't hide." He continued.

"I can't hide something I don't have."

"Prove it."

"Wha?!"

Walter leaned forward, an aggressive gleam lighting in his eyes.

"Pull up your shirt, lemme see your abs."

"...but"

"C'mon."

Walter paused the movie and the dorm became eerily silent. It looked like he was serious about this.

"...Fine."

Jake blushed heavily and gently curled his fingers around the hem of his shirt and pulled it up to his chest, revealing a slightly softened, but still mostly flat tummy.

"Happy?" Jake asked

"I told you I know what these things look like. You're sucking in your gut. Have been for months now, haven't you?"

Jake grimaced at his words.

"It must be excruciating going to all that trouble over a silly thing like that. Go ahead, hang loose. You've earned a break."

The words seemed to melt over Jake and release him from his self-imposed mental prison. He relaxed his abdomen and let his belly roll out in its full glory. His middle suddenly bulged out in triumph, cascading over the edge of his waistband and proceeding outward several inches in a round monument to everything he had consumed.

Walter went wide-eyed and grinned at the sight of it.

"Holy crap, man. I knew you put on a few but I had no idea it was this much."

Without warning, Walter reached out a big meaty claw and grabbed a handful of soft jackal tum. Jake yelped and his blush turned a deep crimson.

"Oh ho ho, and you're not just bloated, this is real fat you got here."

He gave the jackal's belly a squeeze and a shake for emphasis.

"Alright, it's true, damnit. I got fat. I lost control of my life and everything I stood for and gorged on those stupid hamburgers and got fat."

Tears began to well up in his eyes. He continued.

"I knew the day was coming when I couldn't hide it anymore, but at the same time I had to preserve that part of who I am. It was like, my whole identity. Now I'm nothing."

"Dude, you never could hide it, it was obvious from the start. Seriously, it was like amateur hour."

"Then why didn't you say anything?"

"Well, I could see that it was important to you so at first I played along. But after a while, it started looking like you were on the way to some kind of meltdown. Am I right?"

"...Yeah"

"I thought it would be better to confront it early than to let it rot."

"Makes sense."

"Let's just take a step back and look at things objectively. You got a little too into cheeseburgers and gained some weight. Did the world end?"

"...No."

"Did you die?"

"No."

"Did your past self get erased from history?"

"No."

"Then what was the real problem with it?"

Jake paused for a long while, deep in thought.

"...Nothing, I guess. It's just not what's... expected of me."

"Is being a thin, lean, running type still important to you?"

"Now that I think about it... no?"

"What is important to you?"

Jake pondered the question, deep in thought.

"Cheeseburgers."

"Ha. No, really, what's important to you?"

"I'm serious. I tried to deny myself of it all a while back, but I just couldn't resist. I think it's a part of who I am now. I bought a gigantic pile of them and just ate and ate until I was ready to burst."

"Mmm, I remember that. You were doing some weird acrobatics to try and hide your belly behind the kitchen counter."

"Aw damn it, you knew about that?"

"Well of course. The burger wrappers jostling around and falling out of those bags, the belt haphazardly tossed on the floor right around the pile of crumbs where the smell of beef was the strongest. That and the heavy, swollen gut hanging off your middle. Couldn't get a good look at it, but I could tell it was affecting your movement."

"That's all disturbingly accurate, yes."

"Yesss. So how many did you end up having that night? A dozen?"

Jake blushes.

"...Thirty"

"Thirty?! Holy shit. That's way beyond what I can pack away. Wish I could have seen that, you must have been huge. I think this thing might be magical."

Walter gave Jake's belly a hearty pat, sending that tum into a long winded wobble. Jake grinned warmly back at him.

"I have to tell you something. Promise not to laugh?"

Walter listened intently, eyes wide and ears open as Jake continued.

"I promise."

"I loved it.

"Well clearly, if you kept eating them all the way to the count of thirty."

"No, I mean it felt *right*. I loved being filled to the brim with all of that fattening food, packed so tightly that I bloated up like a balloon filled with lead. Knowing that it was only a matter of time before it all got added permanently to me, bulging out my stomach, my rump, my-"

"Dude."

"You said you wouldn't laugh."

"I'm not. I think it's amazing. If that's all true, then your problem isn't really a problem anymore, is it?"

"I suppose so. Some part of me woke up and recognized that it's what I wanted. I guess

I just needed to hear another voice say it was okay."

Walter took in these words and grinned warmly back at Jake.

"I have something I need to tell you, too." Said the monitor lizard.

"I permit laughter here, laugh all you want about this." He continued. "I really, really love a man who can eat. A man who knows what he wants and always eats his fill, and carries every pound he's earned proudly, like a trophy."

"Oh... wow" said Jake, taken aback.

"I got more. Had to start with that for context."

Walter rubbed his claws together nervously.

"The other thing is... I think you're adorable. I've had a crush on you for years. I've always loved how principled and genuine and goddamn cute you are. I've wanted to say this for a long time, but I never worked up the nerve to ask, and all of a sudden you start building that adorable belly and your rump starts filling out behind that adorable tail and AAAAHHH! You're just pushing so many of my buttons all at once and I dunno, maybe I shouldn't have sa-"

Jake leaned in and embraced Walter, giving him a deep kiss. The monitor lizard reciprocated, reaching his claws around the jackal, pinching his dainty little love handles and reaching back for a good squeeze on that plump little rump.

Jake grinned broadly

"I think the next step here is obvious. I want a truckload of the biggest, greasiest cheeseburgers and I want them inside here in the next ten minutes"

Jake poked a claw at his belly. As if somehow hearing a clarion call on the horizon, his

stomach roared into action.

GROOOOAN

The jackal blushed a deep red and smiled broadly.

"That's our cue."

"Man, we are gonna make you so goddamn fat."