

GROUNDHOGS

The Supercharged Forecaster

written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. VIRGINIA - WOODS - CLEARING - DUSK

JET, a spunky groundhog cub at war with every possible threat, scampers out of his burrow and scans the nearby tree line. A stiff breeze draws his gaze to a patch of long, waving grass. He stands tall and listens.

Jet's twin brother SONNY, by far the more cautious of the two, pokes his head out of the burrow.

JET  
Do you hear 'im?

Sonny shakes his head. Jet eyes the shadowy grass and sniffs.

JET  
I smell 'im, too.

Sonny sniffs -- furrows his brow. He creeps out of the hole and sniffs harder.

SONNY  
I don't smell any --

Jet yanks his brother behind a tree.

JET  
He must be as long as the one Dad  
fought off a few sunsets ago.

SONNY  
A s-s-snake? I'll warn the others.

Jet slaps a paw over Sonny's puckered mouth.

JET  
No. No warning whistle. We attack  
before he finds a burrow hole.

SONNY  
B-but what if he swallows us whole?

JET  
(ponders it; grins)  
We chew him in half from the inside.  
(peeks around tree)  
I'm goin' in.

SONNY  
The grass or the snake?

Jet dives into the shadows and wallows in the grass.

JET (O.S.)  
Die, you dirty intruder!

Snap! Sonny gasps. Silence. No movement. Jet's little arms lift a broken stick above the grass.

JET  
Victory is ours!

SONNY  
A stick? You scared the acorns outta  
me over a harmless stick?

Jet jumps out of the grass and twirls in a victory dance.

JET  
I saved us from the evil --

Thump. He bounces off a solid, imposing figure. He looks up at RAY, his larger-than-life, battle-scarred father. Over his shoulder hangs a large, vine-woven pouch.

RAY  
Way to protect our home, Son.

JET  
(prances around father)  
Thanks Dad is it time yet it's dark  
can we go now?

Jet entangles himself in the pouch. Ray untangles him.

RAY  
Quiet, Jet. This is a secret mission  
not everyone agrees with. Including  
your mother.  
(eyes burrow hole)  
And it isn't pretend. It's real.  
(places paws on sons)  
Tonight you cubs become adults.  
Soldiers in the war against the most  
dangerous of all predators: humans.  
Are you ready?

Jet smiles big and nods rapidly. Sonny lowers his head.

JET  
Sonny?

Sonny remains silent. He peeks up at his father and Jet.

SONNY  
I know we've been talking about this  
for a while, but I've been thinking...

JET  
Thinking what?

SONNY  
It's too risky... We might never  
come back... I wish you two wouldn't  
go, either.

Sonny slips to the burrow and drops underground.

JET  
Sonny, wait!

Ray gently holds Jet's tail as Jet treadmills the dirt.

RAY  
Let him go. He's free to make his  
own choices.

JET  
But we're coming back. Aren't we?

RAY  
Sure we are, Son. Although it's  
true that some of our brave ancestors  
who accepted this task were never  
seen again.

JET  
(sinks low to ground)  
Were they turned into groundhog stew?

RAY  
No one knows for sure, but they served  
their burrows honorably. It's our  
duty to carry on the mission of --

JET  
(standing tall)  
Protecting and providing for our  
community.

A proud smile fills Ray's face. He rubs Jet's head.

RAY  
Let's go.

EXT. VIRGINIA - WOODS - NIGHT

Jet races after Ray, weaving through pine and tulip trees.

RAY  
The storm should be here just in  
time to provide cover.

JET

Are you sure?

RAY

Forecasting isn't exact, but with practice we can predict enough details to help our community survive.

JET

Like if the squirrels need to start storing nuts earlier than normal?

RAY

Correct. An early snowfall might otherwise catch them off guard.

(glances at Jet)

You know, Son, part of becoming an adult is learning how to forecast.

JET

(eyes light up)

Are you saying...?

RAY

It's time.

Ray scoops Jet onto his back and weaves behind a tree.

EXT. VIRGINIA - WOODS - NIGHT

Ray charges from behind a different tree and somersaults a beaming Jet safely to the ground.

JET

This is awesome! I wish Sonny was with us.

RAY

Some, even Burrow Security, see garden raids from a different viewpoint.

JET

The wrong one.

Ray winks. Trees grow sparse. The groundhogs slow to a stop and peer across a small field of waving grass to a log house with a lush, fenced garden.

JET

The Garden of Dangers.

RAY

The human dwells in that structure.

JET  
An above-ground home? Weird.

RAY  
Exploring, I've seen many much bigger.  
They use giant machines to wipe out  
nature to make room for 'em. If we  
don't fight back, we'll be overrun.

EXT. FIELD - NIGHT

Jet and his Father approach the fence. It's lined with a  
rainbow of pungent flowers. Jet sniffs and cringes.

JET  
Dad. Have you been eatin' stink  
bugs again?

RAY  
No. The human planted smelly flowers  
to keep us away.

JET  
Ooooooo. F-l-o-w-e-r-s.

RAY  
That's only the beginning, Jet.

Jet covers his snout as they press through to the

FENCE

RAY  
This barrier wasn't here before, but  
we should be able to scale --

Zap -- sparks fly as Ray touches the fence. He recoils with  
a yelp. Jet drops. Ray scans the obstacle shaking his paw.  
He grunts and digs into the dirt. Jet steps into the spray.

RAY  
Shake it off, Son. To reach your  
maximum potential as a warrior for  
your kind, there's gonna be some  
pain involved.

Jet remains still, then shakes off the dirt. Ray pokes his  
head out of the newly-dug tunnel and looks Jet in the eyes.

RAY  
When you were born, I named you Jet  
'cause you reminded me of that energy.  
That spark of a lightning jet.

JET  
Did I zap Mom's tummy?

Ray chuckles and places a paw on Jet's chest.

RAY  
I mean a spark in here. I sensed  
your life would be powerful. You're  
destined to shine.

Jet beams. Ray gazes overhead. Dark clouds cover the moon.

RAY  
And your training starts now.

They duck into the tunnel and creep into

THE GARDEN OF DANGERS

Rain falls. A gust of wind sweeps in. A rattling arises.

JET  
A rattlesnake!

RAY  
No it's just --

Lightning flashes, revealing a shadowy, human-like form  
gyrating wildly before them. Round, rattling objects swing  
from its outstretched arms. Jet shrieks as thunder rumbles.

RAY  
Relax. It's not the human. Just a  
look-alike meant to scare you.

JET  
It worked.

Ray turns Jet's head -- lightning reveals a smorgasbord of  
traps throughout the garden.

RAY  
Those traps, on the other paw, are a  
real concern. And the biggest threat  
is in there.

He points across the garden to a doghouse. Thunder claps.

RAY  
The human's dog. A traitor to all  
the animal kingdom.

JET  
The one who scratched your back.

RAY

I had an itch, anyway. One day I'll return the favor, but right now we need to get what we came for.

JET

(sniffs)

And I can smell it from here.

Jet darts into the darkness. His Father leaps after him.

RAY

Jet don't --

A squeak is heard. The sky lights up. Jet is enclosed in a trap with watermelon rinds. His Father stands by holding up the hatch. He pulls Jet out with his free arm.

RAY

If this hatch had dropped, you'd've been locked in. Do only what I say.

Jet nods. Louder thunder booms. The groundhogs approach

A ROW OF TOMATO PLANTS

surrounded by wire frames that reach near their tops.

JET

Are these full of lightning, too?

RAY

No. They just stabilize the plants. Wouldn't take much for 'em to collapse under the weight of the tomatoes -- especially on a night like this. Pick a few of these. I'll get the rest. If anything goes wrong, head straight for the tunnel and don't stop until you're home.

Jet nods and picks a tomato as Ray goes. Lightning reveals a squirming worm sticking out. He cringes, pitches it over his shoulder, and gazes up the plant. He grins.

Jet climbs the frame -- flash -- notices the doghouse directly down the row. A louder boom. He stares -- no movement.

He reaches for the highest tomato. Can't quite grasp it. He stands and performs a high-wire balancing act. A gust of wind blows. Jet wobbles. The frame sways.

JET

Whoaaa!

He smashes into the next frame. Plants and frames tumble all the way down the row, sending tomatoes rolling toward

THE DOGHOUSE

Ray lunges and blocks a few. A trap snaps one up. Flash. A tomato rolls through the door. Thunder booms! They stare. Out steps SHADOW, a fiercely loyal black Labrador, sneering.

SHADOW

Back for another massage?

RAY

If it isn't the traitor, himself.

SHADOW

The name's Shadow. And I like to think of myself as Man's Best Friend.

RAY

Jet, run!

Ray twirls and smacks the growling, lunging dog in the snout with his pouch. Shadow shakes it off and gives chase.

ON THE TOMATO FRAMES

Jet watches them scoot under a leaning tomato frame and past the pouch. Jet eyes it and leaps along the frames. Lightning flashes. He jumps off the last frame and empties the pouch.

THROUGH THE GARDEN

Shadow nips at Ray's tail. Mechanical hands spring up. One grabs Shadow's tail. He fights loose and resumes the chase.

Ray hopscotches through a spring-loaded trap. Shadow jumps and grazes it -- Snap! -- it just misses him.

Ray zips under a tomato frame. Shadow bursts through after -- Wham -- Jet lands on Shadow -- slams the pouch over his head -- jerks the slack. Shadow rears up and bucks like a bronco.

RAY

Ride 'im, boy!

Jet yanks to the left. Shadow veers left. He yanks right. Shadow veers right. Jet grins -- he's got this. He steers Shadow hopping and yelping through a maze of snapping traps.

JET

Now, to return a favor for Dad.

Jet sideswipes the crackling fence. Shadow howls.

The pouch frays. Shadow gnaws through the vines. Jet gapes.

RAY (O.S.)

In here, Jet!

Ray slaps a trap. Jet steers Shadow into it, flopping flat onto the top as the dog is locked inside. Shadow shakes off the pouch and rattles the trap. He whimpers.

SHADOW

This is embarrassing.

RAY

This is what happens to those who desert their own kind to serve humans. Nice work, Son. You're becoming a --

A rifle cocks. Lightning flashes. There stands the human, MR. TRAPPER (55), pointing a rifle like the Grim Reaper's backwoods brother. He fires. Jet flinches and turns to his Father -- he's gone.

JET

Dad? Don't leave me!

Mr. Trapper scans his decimated garden and yells unintelligible gibberish -- what groundhogs hear when humans speak. He eases toward Jet and aims. Jet freezes.

SHADOW

Move before you get us both killed!

Mr. Trapper looms over Jet, who stands hypnotized by the barrels. Trapper's scowl fades... It reappears.

Shadow jumps against the top of the trap sending Jet airborne. The rifle fires, clipping Jet's left ear -- piercing ringing.

Jet latches onto the rifle for dear life -- Trapper swings it, launching Jet through the air. He lands near his dad, who lies motionless among the trampled crops.

Jet staggers toward his dad as Mr. Trapper reloads. Jet yanks on his father's forelimb. Nothing. Jet gasps. A bullet kicks up dirt. He bolts toward the escape tunnel.

A bullet whizzes past and breaks the scarecrow post, dropping it against the fence -- the cross beam wedges a rattle into the escape tunnel. Jet gasps and ducks under a tipped tomato frame. He spies his Father.

RAY (V.O.)

To reach your maximum potential... there's gonna be some pain involved.

Jet takes a deep breath and darts into the open. Bullets fly. He charges up the propped scarecrow. Crack! Lightning strikes the fence as Jet vaults off with a blast. He falls...

FADE TO BLACK.

FADE IN:

INT. JET'S BURROW CHAMBER - NIGHT

Darkness. Only the strange ringing. Jet's eyelids fight open. JET'S loving MOTHER, brother Sonny, and the rescuing PERIMETER SCOUT, woven vine band on forelimb, encircle him.

Jet lies on a bed of leaves. He groans. His Mother speaks -- a faint murmur. She moves closer.

JET'S MOTHER  
Your father?

JET  
Dad didn't leave me... but he's gone.

She holds him tight, weeping. Jet's brow narrows.

INT. JET'S BURROW CHAMBER - DAY

Jet awakens. Reality hits. He feels his clipped ear, tries to shake leaves off his forepaws. They're wrapped with vines.

JET'S FAMILY BURROW CHAMBER

Jet creeps tenderly out of his room. His Mother lays a mix of berries and nuts before Sonny, who huddles on the dirt floor. Jet favors his right ear as his Mother speaks.

JET'S MOTHER  
We thought you might be hibernating.  
You've been asleep for seven sunrises.

JET  
I have? ... I'm going above.

He grabs a pawful of Sonny's food as he passes by.

EXT. JET'S BURROW - DAY

Jet stands tall and gazes through the woods toward the human's home as he chews. Sonny's head pops out of the hole.

SONNY  
Garden raids have been banned.

Jet holds his gaze. Sonny hops in front of him.