

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 015

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Relief and regret bounced around Oscar's head as he watched Berg wobble up the stairs with all the grace of a particularly engorged dump truck. Worrying about whatever was thumping around the second floor embarrassed the fox. Any small, wild animal would be more afraid of him than he was of it—at least after he got a high-pitched gasp of shock out of his system. And if the source of the commotion *was* Abel, then he had even less to fret about. Berg would undoubtedly draw in Abel's ire like a lightning rod the moment he went off and tried to act tough in front of the grieving wolf.

But there was still the slightest chance Abel might go after a softer target, like the rotund fox who'd already proven easy to puff up without warning. The thought of being blimped up and abandoned in a dark bedroom during a storm didn't appeal to Oscar—and that was his *best-case* scenario. The worst was Cody sticking around to tease him like a bratty, grabby ghost. He imagined the leopard cackling in the shadows, zipping around him and brushing him with his sharpened claws.

Oscar bit his lip when he realized he was blushing.

"Maybe we should go with him," Oscar said to distract himself. Cody was the last person he wanted knowing he was flustered.

"No way." Cody fidgeted in place. The cat had a death grip on his lantern. He glanced over his shoulder occasionally, glaring at sounds Oscar's ears didn't pick up. Or ones that didn't exist. "If the soda keg wants to sniff around, let him do it alone. I'm fine pretending there's nothing up there and waiting for the power to come back on."

"But what if Berg trips and can't get back up? You don't have to be spherical to be immobilized." How many times had Oscar sprawled on the couch after puffing up and realized all too late he couldn't wobble back up? Enough that Cody had once put together a slide-show presentation of pictures detailing his clumsy attempts to escape the couch. And the recliners. And his own bed. Oscar had nearly melted from embarrassment watching his enormous balloon belly projected on the big screen to a crowded audience of his frat brothers.

Vengeance had taken a while, but had been so, so worth it. Oscar doubted Cody would ever forget his weekend spent trapped in his bedroom as a fully inflated cat balloon, too dazed from the pressure to hiss. The spherical feline had made a delightful air bed. He'd resisted the mischievous desire to share that wonderful story with the rest of the frat, though. Doing so would've only encouraged Cody to up the stakes of their back-and-forth teasing, and neither

would win if things escalated further. They'd likely both end up known only for being the resident frat house blimps.

Cody casually placed a paw on Oscar's swollen middle and shoved. Oscar stumbled back a few steps, thick arms spread out and flailing as he fought to maintain his balance. He caught himself at the last second and avoided toppling over like an inflatable lawn ornament hit by a gust.

"What was that for!" Oscar placed his paws on his slightly puffy fists and scowled at the grinning cat.

"Just checking if you're too inflated to get back up. An inflatable couch would be swell right about now," Cody snickered.

Cody didn't have a monopoly on being cheeky. "You're right. Maybe I'll grab the bellows from the fireplace and pump a spotty inflatable couch to crash on while we wait. Just don't be surprised if it turns out I really *can't* sit back up thanks to this." Oscar grinned from ear to ear and patted his round belly with both paws.

The threat wiped the smile off Cody's face and got the much smaller feline to take a few steps back from Oscar. "Whatever," he huffed, doing a poor job of hiding his new paranoia of being blimped up. "Like you could ever hope to catch me, jumbo."

"This boulder has caught up with plenty, spots." Oscar shook his belly menacingly at his friend.

A fresh, thunderous *thump* echoed from upstairs, ending their tease.

"That doesn't sound good. Maybe Berg really did fall over." Oscar imagined the polar bear's bloated belly puffing out from shaken soda. Berg could be wobbling on his back like a rotund rocking horse, sloshing and helpless.

"Then he's out of luck, because I'm definitely not going anywhere near the second floor now!" Cody declared. His tail flicked about, a serpent prepared to strike. "I bet the bloated bastard is pulling a damn prank on us! He's pissed we didn't go with him, so now he's making new noises and lying in wait to scare us if we come to his aid. Maybe he and Abel planned this from the start. Well, fuck that! He can hide up there all night for all I care."

Cody's theory sounded rather outlandish to Oscar. For starters, the universal lack of cell service made it impossible for Abel and Berg to communicate with each other and plot any sort of prank on short notice. And the plan required a lot of assumptions on Berg's part, since Cody and Oscar hadn't shown signs of wanting to be anywhere near the second floor and its odd noises. More likely than not, it'd be Kevin wandering up once he returned from grabbing Abel, and Kevin didn't take pranks well.

Then again, poorly thought-out pranks were practically a pastime at the fraternity. Plenty of shouting matches and fistfights had broken out because of

them. And plenty of folks had ended up round and creaking, too, either because they were the victim of the prank or caught by the victim shortly after. Berg's frustration over missing the game and bloating from the bet could've easily inspired him to mess with the only two victims at hand: Cody and him.

"Or he might actually need help." Oscar's guilty conscience held out against Cody's conspiracies. And the nagging fear that Berg would be furious if he fell and no one came to get him back up. "If we both go up there together, he's less likely to scare us. We can even act like Kevin's with us; Berg wouldn't dare try to prank him!"

"We don't have to do a damn thing if we just pretend we didn't hear that noise and let Kevin deal with it. The extra work might tire him and chill him the fuck out." Cody crossed his arms and held his ground. It'd take a lot of nudging to budge the stubborn cat, but Oscar had experience.

Oscar and Cody both jumped as a loud, painful creaking erupted from upstairs. Oscar looked up to see Berg standing in a bedroom doorway. No, the polar bear *filled* the doorway. Berg's white middle bulged outward, shaking as it continued to swell. Oscar swore Berg hadn't looked half that inflated when he'd headed up to investigate the noise. What could've possibly happened to make him balloon so much in so little time?

"Help!" Oscar winced at Berg's horrible howl. The polar bear looked like he'd seen a ghost. Or was running from one.

The trapped and terrified blimp of a bear suddenly popped out of the doorframe. From down below, Oscar watched Berg rapidly swell into a spherical blimp despite no sign of a hose. It was as if his frat brother was inflating by magic.

"What the fuck!" Cody's tail had poofed up again.

"Berg, what's happening!" Oscar shouted.

Then the fox saw the stranger in black step through the bedroom doorway and loom over Berg. It only took him one look to know for certain the stranger wasn't one of his friends. They lacked antlers, horns, or a big round belly. No one in their right mind dressed like the stranger did outside of Halloween unless they had malicious intentions in mind.

"What the fuck! What the fuck! What the fuck!" Cody clung tightly to Oscar's arm, digging his claws in.

Oscar barely felt the needles of his friend's fearful grip. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the top of the stairs.

The big white ball that Berg had become rolled across the landing and over the edge of the stairs. Belches and creaks rang out as Berg bounced all the way down the stairs, a blur of white and foam. Oscar tensed up with every bounce,

convinced each one would be the end of his imperiled frat brother. But Berg's hide endured the wild tumble downstairs.

Berg continued to grow. His outer extremities sunk into his body, until only the top of his head disrupted his spherical shape. Foam gushed from the polar bear's mouth, reminding Oscar of a soda geyser and giving him his first hint of the fate that'd befallen the poor frat boy.

Oscar hurried over to Berg without any clue as to what he could actually do for him. He dragged Cody along for the ride, who seemed glued to his arm. The creaks emanating from Berg's swollen body sounded horrific, like a hundred hands squeezing the surface of a balloon.

Oscar saw the terror in Berg's eyes. Then he was covering his own as the polar bear exploded in a flash of foam and hide.

The volatile blast knocked Oscar clean off his feet and onto his plush ass. Something firm and bumpy broke the fat fox's fall. He thought he'd crushed one of the lanterns, until he heard the slurred meow behind him and realized he'd landed on Cody.

Shit! "Give me a sec, spots." Oscar only sat up halfway before his balloon belly pressed against his knees, pushing him back to the floor. A muffled meow came from under him. Oscar tried again, but his round middle refused to cooperate, pinning him down despite being filled with air. The jokes shared between him and Cody had turned very real at the worst possible moment.

Boot steps thudded on the stairs, slow and precise. Oscar glimpsed the stranger descending at a stiff, leisurely pace. Dressed in black, they blended in with the shadows of the poorly lit room. Lantern light danced ominously off their slick coat and hood. They had ruthlessly popped Berg, and Oscar knew he and Cody would be next if they didn't get away.

The waking nightmare that'd been thrust upon Oscar spurred him into desperate action. The swollen fox threw his whole weight into rocking back and forth, until finally he managed to overcome his gut and get off the floor. Cody twitched and groaned, rattled from being squashed by a friend well over twice his size.

"This isn't the time for a cat nap!" Oscar frantically slapped Cody's cheek a couple of times as he pulled the slack leopard to his feet. "We gotta run and get the others!"

But recovering from the explosion had cost the pair valuable time. The stranger now stood between them and the only door to the outside world.

A tiny scrap of soda-soaked polar bear hide fell from the ceiling. The stranger snatched it out of the air and squeezed it tight. "Three trespassers gone. No one defiles my lake." Their gravelly voice made Oscar feel faint.

Oscar hoped the stranger was bluffing. As if popping Berg in front of them wasn't terrifying enough, he claimed to have reduced two others to scraps as well. But if they told the truth, then maybe Webb's bursting hadn't been an accident. Maybe the rabbit had simply been the first victim, ambushed in a manner that left everyone assuming he'd done something uncharacteristically stupid. Only Abel had doubted the scene.

But who was the alleged third, then? Oscar thought of the missing Abel and gulped.

Think strong thoughts. Think strong thoughts, Oscar begged himself.

The fox's only hope of escaping with Cody in one piece was to avoid a total meltdown. The stranger wasn't armed, though neither was he. His lantern was small and made of plastic, too light to serve as a club or a projectile. All the utensils in the kitchen were plastic. He couldn't see him wielding a chair effectively. Besides, if the stranger had any more mints on him, the last thing Oscar wanted to do was lead them to a stockpile of soda. There'd just be two more soda bombs going off.

Imagining himself taking on the stranger and winning simply wasn't happening. Oscar didn't want to fight; he wanted to flee. He wanted to wake up still a comfortably taut balloon on the lake, with everyone still intact and no psychopath in sight.

Cody's claws dug deeper into Oscar's arm, painfully confirming he was very much awake. "The window, damn it! The window!" The frightened leopard tugged at him, pointing at the hall to the kitchen.

Oscar had the faintest memory of seeing a window in the kitchen, but the potential of an escape route drove the bloated fox to wobble after Cody in a brisk jog he already knew his calves would protest.

"W-Wait up!" Oscar gasped as Cody raced down the hall to the big window between the kitchen and dining area.

Wood and glass rattled as Cody scrambled with the latch. He eventually undid it and shoved the window open hard. The cat was through in seconds.

The closer Oscar got to the window, the worse his doubts became. The window seemed wide enough, but it was higher up than he remembered. He dropped the lantern when he reached it and instantly realized his own passage would be far more difficult than Cody's. Behind him, the heavy steps of the stranger grew closer and closer.

Oscar dragged two chairs to the window and hefted himself up, ignoring the creaks and groans. Bending over was awkward with his puffy middle. He stuck his head and shoulders out, then braced himself on the frame.

Raindrops thundered on the patio roof. The nearby hot tub sputtered like something was caught in its jets, but he couldn't see much in the dark. He swore

he smelled the strong aroma of marshmallows, though, which made less sense than the maniacal stranger steadily approaching.

With a grunt, Oscar hefted his balloon belly through the window. There were only a couple of inches of clearance on either side. He was just about halfway out when he felt the firm grip of a gloved hand on his ankle.

“He’s got me! He’s got me!” Oscar wailed and flailed, teetering up and down on the edge of the window. “Help!”

Cody, his fur so puffed up in fright he sort of looked inflated, grabbed one of Oscar’s arms, and pulled. Oscar barely felt himself budge.

“You gotta pull harder!” Oscar begged. The stranger’s grasp countered Cody effortlessly.

“Damn it, jumbo, I’m trying!” Cody hissed as he pulled over and over. “You’re too damn big!”

A hearty slap connected with Oscar’s vast rump, causing him to yip. Then he felt something slip past his pants and under his tail. Years of experience told Oscar it was a hose of some kind, and he knew there was only one place back there it could possibly be going. He blushed and winced as his suspicions were confirmed. A pump loudly whirred to life, sending a gush of air swirling into the fox’s middle. His bloating belly swiftly pressed against all four sides of the window frame, sealing him in place.

Inflation had been joyful and frustrating for Oscar in the past, but never terrifying. The frantic fox’s hips and chest puffed up, straining the seams of his clothing as he took on a rounder shape. The window frame dug into every side of him like a belt being gradually tightened. A ring of pressure stretched around him, pulsing with greater intensity by the second. He was bound to burst before the frame if he didn’t squeeze through the window somehow.

“Shit!” Cody cursed as he continued tugging, not making any better progress than before. “Slip through, jumbo! Slip through, damn it!”

With his creaking hide on the line, Oscar tried everything he could think of to free himself. He kicked blindly, rocked back and forth, pushed, pulled, and wobbled every which way. He wiggled his rear, hoping to dislodge the hose, but the stranger had ensured his connection to the pump would remain strong. He even forced out a few desperate belches, as if they’d counter the torrent of fresh air.

The pressure grew and grew. Large tears formed in Oscar’s clothes, which slid off him one tattered piece at a time, uncomfortably reminding him of hide scraps. His arms swelled and sank. His face ballooned until his round cheeks pinched his snout shut. Worrisome creaks echoed from his blimping body, but the window frame creaked just as loud. He yelped when one side of the frame cracked, warping from the pressure of the massive fox. The remaining three sides

followed shortly after, buckling almost simultaneously. He lurched an inch forward and thought he might slide free, but his huge body greedily swelled to fill the new gaps. There'd be no escape so long as the hose remained in Oscar and the pump ran on full blast.

Cody lost his grip and fell to the patio with a howling meow. The leopard tried to stand, but immediately slipped and fell on his tail again. And while he stumbled, Oscar swelled. And swelled. And swelled.

Oscar was well acquainted with the pressure that accompanied inflation, but he'd never felt it so intensely concentrated before. It sort of reminded him of Cody's sharp prods and pokes, spread out across his entire circumference rather than centered on one spot. He struggled far less as the creaks grew louder and the pressure more mind scrambling.

Wild fantasies tumbled into his head between the dazes. The wall would cave and free him. The pump's battery would die. The pressure was all in his imagination. Kevin and Dante would return with Abel and pull him to safety. He'd prove more durable than he believed.

Oscar repeated the fantasies to himself until everything became a permanent blur. Then, the taut, delusional fox came to believe he was a blimp floating high in the sky, perhaps a bit more inflated than necessary.

Far, far away from Oscar's jumbled pleasant thoughts, a balloon blew apart in a thunderous explosion.