

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 012

By: Indigo Rho

Abel's mood had burst along with Webb.

The melancholic wolf sat alone at the dining table in the lodge, with the container of Webb's scraps on the table before him. Nothing felt real anymore. Abel and Webb had chatted not even two hours ago, and now the rabbit was gone, blown apart and reduced to a pile of barely recognizable scraps.

He alternated between staring at the container of scraps and literally anything else. He kept hoping it'd change into something else or vanish completely. Of course it remained there, horrible proof of a reality he didn't want to believe.

Footsteps echoed down the short hall that led into the kitchen and dining room. Abel tilted his head just enough to see who was coming out of the corner of his eye. It was Dante.

Abel exhaled. He wasn't all that close to Dante, but he knew enough about the bull to know he was probably there to talk. And Abel hadn't decided if he wanted to talk with anyone yet. The condolences the rest of the guys had mumbled at him on the way back to the lodge had all sounded so shallow and awkward, spoken more out of a perceived obligation than from the heart. He didn't hate them for the attempt; he just desperately wanted them to wait until they had something meaningful to say.

Maybe Dante hadn't wandered by to talk. He could be grabbing a drink or a snack before retreating to the main room where the baseball game was on. Where three of the guys remained puffy and bloated despite the nature of Webb's horrible accident. Berg and Blake were in the middle of a dumb sports bet that involved guzzling soda, while Oscar hadn't fully deflated since discovering Webb's scraps. The fox was shaken; even Abel could see that.

Unfortunately for Abel, Dante made his way to the table. The bull didn't take a seat but stood across the table, where he couldn't easily be ignored.

"Did you want someone to talk to?" Dante asked.

Abel had expected to say no without hesitation. Dante was his frat brother, not his friend. He'd be fine going to the guy for advice on classes or places to grab food. A conversation about popping was a little too deep for acquaintances. All he'd have to say is "no," and Dante would leave him be. But Abel didn't necessarily want to be alone with only his thoughts and Webb's scraps for company, and Dante was the most down-to-earth guy there.

"You're free to sit if you want," Abel grunted. He'd let the bull say his piece and figure out from there if he wanted to hear more. He wasn't the sort to pour his heart out, anyway.

Dante took a seat at the table. "I'm really sorry about what happened to Webb. I know the two of you were really close, and he...he didn't deserve to go out like this."

No shit. Abel massaged his brow so firmly he thought he might crack his skull. Part of him wished he did. "I should've stuck with Webb. When he got into trouble, I would've been able to stop it."

"You can't blame yourself," Dante said without skipping a beat. "You had no way of knowing Webb was going to inflate himself again, or that things would go wrong."

"It doesn't make any damn sense!" Abel slammed a fist down on the table, rattling the container of scraps and briefly jolting Dante. He reached for the container on instinct, protectively pulling it in close. "Webb should've known better. He inflates all the time. Not once have I ever seen him come close to losing control."

Dante took a deep breath. "Sometimes people who inflate a lot grow too comfortable and take unnecessary risks. The same thing can happen to climbers, overconfident drivers, and anyone who regularly works alongside wild animals. One little mistake can have dire consequences. And being high would increase the chances of an accident happening."

"It's not like Webb was stoned out of his mind! He took a hit at the gas station and had a small smoke break before he left to dry off, but that was all." Just the usual, everyday buzz the rabbit liked to maintain. "That's fucking nothing to him."

"Is there a chance Webb smoked more on his way to the bathroom cabin, or even after he got there?"

"He knew better than to get stoned and wander around outside, if that's what you're implying," Abel growled. But with the camp buildings all within sight of each other, Webb might not have taken the same precautions he took while in the actual wilderness or anywhere in general he wasn't familiar with. Abel himself wouldn't think twice about getting shit-faced drunk and roaming between the buildings of Camp Ample Lake, so why would Webb be any less cautious?

Dante sat silently for a moment. "I meant no disrespect. I just want to make sure you aren't blaming yourself. It was all just terrible luck." The bull locked eyes with Abel. "Do you want to come back to the main room with me? You don't have to talk to anyone, but it might help to be around people right now."

The bull had a point, but Abel still didn't feel he could handle being with the others. Too many bloated bellies. Too many creaks. Too many reminders of the thing that brought Webb joy and had ultimately been the end of him. "Maybe

later. What I really need is a drink and something to eat.” And for Webb to bounce into the room after getting lost in the woods, baffled as to why everyone thought he’d exploded.

He stood, grabbing Webb’s container on his way up. He wouldn’t abandon the rabbit again. “I’m heading to the mess hall.” There’d be a lot more of everything there and a lot less of everyone else.

“I can join you. If you’d like,” Dante said.

“No.” Abel didn’t shout, but he spoke with a firmness he hoped would get the point across that he didn’t want to be around anyone, regardless of their good intentions. “Look, dude, I understand what you’re trying to do, and I don’t fault you for it, but I just need time to myself.”

Dante nodded softly, reservation expressed all over the bull’s face. “If that’s what helps,” he said. “But I’m here if you need someone. We all are.”

“Thanks.” Abel didn’t mean to sound dismissive of Dante’s efforts, but his mind was elsewhere.

The worst part of the lodge was the lack of a backdoor for Abel to sneak out of. Unless he wanted to try his luck scrambling through the window, he’d have to leave through the front door, which meant being seen by everyone else. He hoped none of them were feeling as helpful as Dante, because their therapy skills were abysmal.

Despite the wolf’s fears of becoming the center of attention the moment he stepped foot in the main room, his passage mainly went unnoticed. Berg and Blake were arguing about base-stealing stats on the couch. Cody and Oscar were nowhere in sight, though Abel’s ears picked up muffled conversation coming from upstairs. Only Kevin glanced his way, and Abel made no attempt to acknowledge him in any way. They were friends, but Kevin was about as good at handling a deep conversation as gasoline was at putting out a fire.

Dark clouds covered every inch of the formally blue sky, escalating the earlier drizzle into a downpour. The sun hid just below the horizon, generating a fiery glow in the distance. Abel stood under the covered porch for a few minutes and simply listened. Webb had enjoyed the sound of rain. Whenever it rained, the rabbit would throw open his window, light up, and stare at the ceiling, his long ears angled towards the noise. It was chill, and Webb loved nothing more than chill.

Abel clutched Webb’s container against his chest. “Sounds good, dude, doesn’t it?” he whispered.

For once, walking through the rain didn’t bother Abel. He avoided the puddles starting to form, but he didn’t run to the mess hall. He let the raindrops drum on the container in his paws and thought of better times that left him

feeling lightheaded. A thorough shake at the entrance flung away water from Abel's tail and head.

The first thing Abel did when he reached the kitchen in the back was grab a bottle of beer. He smacked the bottle hard against a counter to knock off the cap and chugged, draining half the beer in a single long, greedy gulp. He paid for his impatience afterward with a coughing fit and foam dripping from his muzzle, but he didn't care. He needed to be drunk, and the sooner, the better.

While guzzling the rest of his first beer, Abel scrounged around for food. He'd forgotten that everything of substance was back in the lodge fridge. All he had access to in the mess hall were chips and the bulk ingredients for s'mores. Unwilling to return so soon and worried Dante might ambush him for a second round of therapy, Abel settled on marshmallows.

Abel snatched handfuls of marshmallow bags from the cabinets and dumped them on a counter. The mourning wolf didn't give a shit about what he was and wasn't supposed to eat. As far as he was concerned, the frat party had been canceled the second Webb had burst. And he was sure the authorities would feel the same way. Even accidental poppings required an investigation. There'd be long interviews with cops digging for lies and foul play, obsessed more with getting confessions than the truth. The next few days were going to be horrible.

Abel ripped open a bag of marshmallows and shoveled the puffy, sugary treats into his maw. He couldn't think of a single snack he loved more than marshmallows. He'd give up booze for them if he had to, though he was grateful he'd never have to make the choice. They were big and fluffy and squishy and tasty—just a delight to eat.

Marshmallows had always been a favorite of Abel, but it was Webb who'd gotten him hooked on them as a comfort treat. The gorging wolf thought back to the days immediately following his abrupt departure from the swim team. He hadn't been sure yet if quitting was the right decision—losing the scholarship and pissing off his dad had weighed him down like concrete shoes. He'd been on edge, snapping at everyone around him over the most insignificant things. It was a miracle he didn't ruin any friendships in the process.

Then, in the middle of freaking out about whether he should go crawling back to the swim team, Webb had tossed him a bag of marshmallows.

"Don't panic, just eat," Webb had told him matter-of-factly. All the rabbit's advice boiled down to simple things, unless he believed something supernatural was involved.

Despite still being conscious of his calorie intake at the time, Abel had taken Webb's advice and stuffed himself with marshmallows while they talked. And, to his great surprise, it'd worked. For one wonderful hour, he'd forgotten

all about the swim team. From then on, marshmallows had been his key to calming down—that and Webb.

Abel opened a second bottle of beer and raised it to the nearby container of scraps. “To you, dude. There’ll never be another like you.” His voice cracked, and he swiftly chugged the beer to drown his sorrows.

The wolf tore through bag after bag and beer after beer. Abel’s belly steadily bloated from snacks and liquor, pushing out from under his shirt. He ignored the sloshing and the faint hint of pressure in his middle. Calories didn’t mean shit. Eating and drinking himself into a stupor was preferable to dwelling on the loss of Webb.

Every memory Abel had of Webb was a good one. He’d gotten such a kick out of rolling and bouncing the inflated rabbit around. Webb had always been there to offer him a pair of tall ears to listen to his woes and frustrations, even when he was high as a kite. Webb’s advice was often questionable on a good day, but it never failed to get a laugh out of Abel. That was exactly what he’d needed when his dad acted like a shit about his weight and quitting the swim team.

Abel’s eyelids drooped as he pushed aside yet another empty beer bottle. His belly bulged before him, a round ball of gooey marshmallow and fizzy beer. He felt about ready to stop his feast. Maybe just one more beer and bag.

A deep, messy belch erupted from the wolf’s maw. “Fuck me. Webb would’ve gotten a laugh out of that one.”

In the wake of the echoing burp, Abel heard footsteps. He groaned. Dante must have finally come looking for him. Or worse, Kevin. If Kevin tried to make a fuss about the mess, he’d flip the fucker off.

“I don’t need a fucking chat,” Abel grumbled without bothering to turn around. “Just leave me alone.”

He waited for Dante’s sympathetic response or Kevin’s judgemental one. All he got was silence.

And an unknown arm wrapped tightly around his neck in a chokehold.

The sudden attack from behind ripped Abel from his drunken daze. He twisted wildly, but the stranger followed along with his every move. Back, left, right, forwards—none of it did a damn thing. He reached for a beer bottle with his one free arm. His fingers brushed against some bottles, knocking them to the floor, where they shattered. The stranger’s grip grew tighter and tighter, depriving Abel of air.

Abel wasn’t used to getting manhandled. He was a big guy, more than capable of using his bulk to win arm wrestling contests, tease blimps, and puff up whoever he wanted. But his attacker didn’t budge on a whim, moving only when they wanted to. Abel’s furious instincts to fight couldn’t hold up to his

body's desperate need for oxygen. His vision blurred. His formerly fierce struggles withered away into twitches and flops. Then everything went dark.

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A splash of cold water woke Abel, sending the wolf into a coughing fit. His throat felt raw, and his neck ached horribly. When he tried to wipe the water off his face, he realized his arms wouldn't move. They were tied to the arms of the chair he was sitting in, and his legs were tied as well. Half the lights in the room were out, but Abel recognized it as the mess hall kitchen.

"What the fuck is going on," Abel croaked. Speaking pained him worse than any sore throat he'd ever come down with. He struggled to put his thoughts together, addled by booze and getting choked out.

The stranger stomped into view. They were dressed in black and concealed by the dim lights. Water ran down their heavy raincoat, dripping onto the floor around them. "No one defiles my lake." The threat rumbled from deep within them, grating like tires on gravel.

The stranger turned towards the counter, which Abel now saw was covered in marshmallow bags. It looked as if the party's entire haul had been unloaded. The stranger picked up a bag and stomped up to Abel.

Abel cowered in his seat, unsure what his captor had planned for him.

The stranger dug a gloved hand into the bag and pulled out a giant handful of marshmallows. He grabbed Abel's muzzle, forced it open, and shoved the marshmallows in. When Abel tried to spit the marshmallows out, the stranger clamped down on his muzzle, forcing him to chew and swallow. Abel had only a moment to cough and gag before the next handful of marshmallows were forced upon him.

More and more marshmallows entered Abel's maw. The terrified wolf had no choice but to eat what was fed to him to avoid choking. He pulled at his bindings with all his might to no avail. The ropes were too tight, and Abel wasn't anywhere near his best. Struggling only weakened him further, leaving him with a slew of new aches.

The stranger didn't explain himself. He didn't taunt or laugh at Abel. He merely fed the wolf, pausing only to grab more marshmallows. The messy feeding left a trail of crushed marshmallows from the counter to the chair.

Fighting back swiftly exhausted Abel. He never gave up, but he could do little aside from squirming ineffectually. That, and eat. And eat. And eat. Bag after bag of marshmallows was emptied into the helpless wolf, who was treated as nothing but a wiggling storage container. His belly steadily bulged outwards, swelling across his lap and against his arms. He lost count of how many bags

The water rapidly heated Abel's belly, causing the mass of marshmallows he'd been force-fed to expand. Busy trying not to drown, Abel didn't initially notice he was inflating. Only when he acclimated to the warmth and felt a rising pressure in his middle did he realize something was wrong.

Abel watched in horror as his belly ballooned in every direction. He'd seen enough videos online to know how much marshmallows expanded in the heat, and he knew he was packed full of them. What he didn't know was if the stranger intended to turn him into a gooey marshmallow bomb.

I gotta get out! I gotta get out! Abel's heart thundered in his chest.

Abel braced himself against a built-in seat of the hot tub. His arms wobbled, weak from his futile struggle earlier. They gave way before he even managed to straighten them out, sending him sliding back down into the water. The frantic wolf tried over and over again to pull himself out of the hot tub, but each attempt failed worse than the last. He was drunk, sluggish, and hurting all over, a pale shadow of his typical self. What little strength remained was wasted struggling against inevitability.

Rounder and rounder and rounder, the wolf's gut grew, seemingly intent on swelling forever. The more he inflated, the more he displaced the water in the hot tub, until it lapped over the edge and onto the deck. He cooled off some, but not enough to slow the swelling already in motion. The swelling spread to Abel's hips and chest, puffing him out. His soaked pants and shirt squeezed him like a vice, but the fabric couldn't stand against his ballooning form. Tears formed, and seams were pulled apart. The stiffening of his limbs signaled that getting out of the hot tub on his own power had become undeniably impossible. He could only hope that his hide held together or that one of the guys found him.

Abel's back puffed out, slowly pushing him upright and to the center of the hot tub. He wobbled as his arms and legs swelled and sank. He resembled an enormous marshmallow more and more with each passing second, Oscar's earlier tease now somewhat prescient. The wolf ballooned to fit every nook and cranny of the hot tub, until his spherical body pressed against all four sides. The hot tub's swarm of jets vibrated him, making his teeth clatter together.

Pressure and heat smothered Abel's mind. While he'd had the misfortune of fully inflating with air on a few occasions, marshmallow was an entirely new and harrowing experience. Molten and gooey, it heated him to his very core. Even after the water had been dispersed, he still felt like he was trapped in a sauna.

Creaks occurred more frequently, piercing the rainfall and the muffled jets. Jolts of pressure spread across Abel's body like lightning bolts, highlighting the weaker points of his hide. His paws sunk away, and the vast curve of his bloated body steadily filled more and more of his vision. Marshmallow goo crept up his throat and leaked out of the corners of his mouth.

Thinking turned into just as much of a struggle as everything else. Abel felt like he was dipping in and out of consciousness, shoved from one scrambled thought to the next. With the tiny grasp of self he retained, he willed himself to stay in one piece.

The stranger stomped into view, casting a shadow over Abel. “Another balloon dealt with. No one defiles my lake,” they growled.

Though he hovered on the edge of a pressure daze, Abel understood the stranger’s words and what they implied. Webb hadn’t burst in an accident; he’d been attacked. Grief and rage fended off the pressure, if only for a moment. Abel wanted nothing more than to wring the neck of the thing looming over him. He wanted to avenge his friend and prove Webb hadn’t been a fool.

But the creaking marshmallow of a wolf no longer had any way to fight. The daze wiped away Abel’s fury, banishing him to chase after scattered thoughts of Webb.

Multiple ruptures appeared across Abel’s body, settling his fate. The wolf exploded, spraying marshmallow goop far and wide. Goo splattered the walls and back window of the lodge. It clung and then dripped from the ceiling of the covered deck, dripping like wobbly hail. Half the hot tub was filled with liquid marshmallow, which soon bubbled from the jets. Abel’s brilliant white hide scraps blended in with the goop.

As night fell upon Camp Ample Lake, the stranger marched into the rain and darkness.