

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 04

By: Indigo Rho

The eroding exterior of the gas station almost felt quaint to Dante after the volatile confrontation between Roscoe and the Sheriff. The bull didn't care for fights, even when they remained verbal, and he'd spent the whole argument worried he and the others would get dragged into a local conflict they had no connection to.

Dante glanced over his shoulder to make sure Roscoe hadn't abandoned his post to share more ghost stories. The ferret made him deeply uncomfortable. There was something about the tone of his voice, how he described the supposed curse with a sense of undisguised glee. Roscoe didn't just believe a ghost haunted Ample Lake, bursting those who offended it; he practically welcomed it. Warnings were tainted with smug satisfaction, as if he celebrated the demise of those who ignored him. There certainly didn't seem to be any love lost between Roscoe and Strout, someone who'd apparently popped at the lake recently.

Of course, Sheriff Sutton didn't offer Dante any warmth, either. The man had an explosive temper and turned on his own deputy without hesitation. Dante hoped never to see him again.

"Did y'all know Lake Ample's the most haunted place in northeastern Columbia State?" Webb asked. Visiting the gas station had only swelled the rabbit's boundless enthusiasm for the supernatural. He'd chatted Roscoe's ears off while the rest of the supplies had been gathered, saving the other guys from more ominous tales of people exploding at the lake. Unfortunately, it only seemed to have delayed the inevitable, as Webb had absorbed a treasure trove of local legends.

Cody released an unsubtle, exasperated sigh while Berg and Blake snickered. Dante didn't care to hear Webb's new stories, either, but he wasn't about to silence the rabbit for being overly enthusiastic.

"Roscoe says there has to be a massive vein of quartz running under the area or something. It's the only thing that could soak up so much negative energy. Whenever the quartz charges fully, it overflows and allows the Ample Lake Burster to manifest and wreak vengeance." Webb reported his absurd theories with the confidence of a tenured professor.

"I don't think rocks are what's making people around here crazy," Cody said.

"The energy at Camp Ample Lake is apparently really bad, too." Webb went on without reacting to Cody's remarks at all. Mockery bounced right off the rabbit. "The ghost popped four people there twenty years ago."

“Maybe he’ll pop you next, bro,” Berg told Webb. The polar bear mimed his belly swelling big and round, then exploding.

Webb laughed. “Nah, I’ve got protection.” He pulled out a silver necklace hidden behind his shirt. A purple crystal hung from the chain. “Amethyst fends off bad energy. Works as well against angry ghosts as it does negative moods. With all the good vibes we’re bringing to the lake for the party, I doubt we’ll have to worry about the curse, though.”

“And the less we talk about curses and popping, the better the vibes will be,” Kevin insisted, putting a merciful end to Webb’s rambling.

The guys piled into their trucks, laps laden with snacks and frozen meals. Kevin took the lead, and this time Cody stuck right behind him.

Dante spent the last brief leg of their drive staring out the window at the passing trees. He took in the view—as repetitive as it was—and pushed away all superstitious thoughts. There’d be no malicious sheriffs, creepy locals, or vengeful ghosts at the party. Just a whole lot of students having a bit too much to drink and enjoying themselves. And none of them would pop, not after Rho Theta Rho’s suspension ordeal.

“Here we are.” Kevin’s announcement broke Dante from his daze. The elk turned onto a dirt road and stopped before a large, rustic wooden gate. A sign reading “Camp Ample Lake” in bright white letters hung from the gate, gently swaying in the breeze. The place already looked more welcoming than the gas station the group had left.

Kevin got out and unlocked the gate, shoving the wooden doors wide open. He flexed at the waiting trucks, only returning when Cody honked at him.

“Sounds like you had a critic,” Dante said as the elk buckled up.

“Cody’s just jealous that my muscles weigh more than he does,” Kevin smirked, earning nothing but groans from his passengers.

They drove past the gate and wound down a steep, curving path that hardly counted as a road. With how much the truck rocked, the road seemed to be covered more in rocks than dirt. Bushes and low branches stretched over the road, brushing the sides of the vehicle.

“I wish they’d keep the damn road clear.” Kevin winced as another branch swatted his sideview mirror.

“What road, dude?” Berg asked sarcastically. “Pretty sure wagon trails were smoother than this.” He tightened his grip on his bags. “It’s shaking up all my soda!”

“Just be glad you didn’t chug a bottle before we left the gas station like you swore you would,” Blake said. “With all that shaking, you’d have swelled up and filled the car, big guy!” The crow reached past the bags on Berg’s lap and jiggled the polar bear’s belly.

Dante imagined Berg blimping in the back, with his big white gut swelling against the seat in front of him. He'd likely get wedged right away.

"I'd have made you walk the second you started bloating," Kevin threatened. "No way would I risk you inflating and exploding in my damn truck."

"Bro, I can handle my soda. Bears don't burst!" Berg gave a sharp nod.

"Sure they don't," Kevin replied.

The rough road eventually flattened out, and the trees parted, giving the frat boys their first in-person view of Camp Ample Lake. A handful of wooden buildings occupied a clearing along the shore of Lake Ample. The largest building stood at the very center, its sides covered in wide windows. Dante guessed it was the mess hall Kevin had mentioned the other day, where the bulk of the party would be held.

A two-story lodge with a wrap-around porch was between the mess hall and the lake. It had the feel of a vacation house, though Dante doubted it'd been as homey back when the place was an actual summer camp. On the other side of the mess hall, small cabins stretched along the tree line. A bathroom cabin was between them and the lodge.

From a glance, Dante had to admit Camp Ample Lake appeared pretty nice. There certainly wasn't any visible grime or gaping holes in the roofs. Rotting, overgrown ruins didn't lurk at the edges of the property. The owners might have cheaped out on the road, but the few photos he'd seen online weren't lying. At least not yet. He'd reserve final judgment until after he'd seen the buildings on the inside.

The road took a wide curve around the mess hall before ending abruptly at a gravel parking lot not close to any building. Kevin parked, and Cody came alongside him. The eight frat boys piled out of the two trucks, stretching their legs and looking around.

"Alright, guys, gather up!" Kevin clapped his hooves and herded everyone together. He beamed at the attention. "As I've told you already, we've got today and tomorrow to get everything ready for the big party this weekend. Tomorrow's the hard day, as we'll be arranging the mess hall, prepping the huge fucking bonfire, and getting food and drinks laid out. But after that, you'll be free! No responsibilities during the party, no handling the monumental cleanup after the party. Seriously, consider yourselves lucky to have been selected for the easy job."

Berg and Blake hip-checked each other in celebration while the others nodded.

"Now, we *do* have some tasks to finish today before the sun goes down, but they're all little things that I know we'll blow right through. And once we're through, we can relax for the rest of the night. Sounds good, right?" Kevin waited

for a few more nods before he continued. “Cody. Oscar. Abel.” He pointed at the three in turn. “You’re in charge of transferring the groceries from the trucks to the mess hall kitchen.”

“Bro, it’ll be a miracle if half those groceries don’t end up in Oscar and Abel.” Berg smiled at his hefty frat brothers.

Rather than frown, Oscar smiled right back at Berg. “Sometimes hard-working paws slip, and it’d be a shame to let any fallen snacks go to waste. Are you envious of the fulfilling responsibility we’ve been granted?” The fox’s mischievous grin pinched his round cheeks.

“No one’s eating the party supplies, got it?” Kevin looked Oscar and Abel in the eyes. “Got it?”

“I swear we won’t scarf everything down, boss. Scout’s honor,” Abel said. “Holding back Cody will be tricky, though. We all know that kitty’s a bottomless pit.”

“Oh fuck you!” Cody hissed. The leopard’s tail snapped back and forth as if swatting flies.

“Good to know you’ll keep each other honest. And here’s the keys to the mess hall. Don’t lose them.” Kevin handed the keys to Cody, who spun them around a finger before shoving them in his pocket. “Berg. Blake. Webb. Bring the lanterns and the rest of the non-perishable gear to the lodge. Make sure electricity’s working and water’s running. Look for any broken windows, obvious leaks, nests, bad smells—any sign the place wasn’t handed over to us in as-advertised condition. I don’t want us being fined for shit we didn’t do. Check on all that stuff everywhere, actually. If something looks off, take a picture and text it to me.”

Dante pulled out his phone. A small red “x” loomed over his empty signal bars. “Uh, there might be a problem with that. I don’t get a signal out here.”

Everyone’s phones came out. One by one, they all confirmed a lack of signal.

“Fuck me. No one’s got bars? Not even one?” Kevin asked. The elk got head shakes in reply. “So much for keeping Axel up to date. Maybe I’ll drive back up to the main road later tonight and send a message there.” He tapped his foot on the gravel and took a deep breath. “Okay. Never mind sending texts, but take pictures of anything that’s messed up. We’ll just meet back up at the lodge when our tasks are finished.” He handed the lodge keys to Blake.

“Dante, you’re with me. We’ll check on the dock, the cabins, and the bathroom to ensure they’re in the condition we were promised. Anyone got questions about their job?” No one spoke up, not even to make a snarky comment. “Great! Remember, the sooner we get through this, the sooner we can chill. But don’t half-ass it!”

Dante watched the guys circle the trucks and prepare to unload. Kevin strolled past and gestured toward the lake with a tilt of his head, not saying a word. Dante went after him.

“If you give me all the easy work, the guys might think I’m getting special treatment,” Dante said once they were away from the others. The bull preferred blending in to standing out, and the fewer eyes glaring at him, the better. At times, he felt comfier at huge parties than small get-togethers, relishing the chance to become just another face in the crowd.

Kevin raised a brow. “So you think you got the easy job?”

“Peeking in on some cabins doesn’t seem difficult. I know I’d choose that over handling the groceries or gear.” Dante’s arms felt sore just thinking about it. Access to the campus’ massive fitness center and the gym in the frat house’s basement hadn’t motivated Dante to work out as he’d initially thought they would.

“We don’t have to carry anything, but we’ve gotta cover more ground than the others. And make sure everything in the bathroom cabin is running properly. Toilets, showers, dryers, sinks—the works.” A small grin formed on Kevin’s face. “Why are you so sure I’m giving you special treatment?”

“I...well, we’re friends.” *Just friends*, Dante reminded himself. He’d crushed on Kevin since they were freshmen pledges—and known the elk was bisexual since sophomore year—but anything beyond lewd ribbing and the rare blowjob seemed impossible. Kevin wasn’t interested in him as a long-term prospect, and Dante had come to accept the feeling was mutual. So the pair existed in a dubious, in-between state that wasn’t quite friends with benefits but well past a platonic relationship.

“Abel’s my friend, too. So is Berg.”

“You don’t go down on Berg,” Dante teased. “Unless he’s gotten a whole lot better at keeping a secret.”

“Of course not. It’s not my antlers he’s lusting after. He’s got that deer of his from the college paper to keep him company. But if you’re that concerned the guys will think I’m favoring you, I’ll give you twice as much work as the others tomorrow.” Kevin slapped Dante hard on the back, sending the bull stumbling forward a few feet.

“You don’t have to go that far,” Dante laughed.

Camp Ample Lake’s dock hadn’t received much attention during the remodel. It was long and shaped like a capital “F,” with plenty of posts for securing small watercraft. Two aluminum row boats bobbed in the water, ready for use. A concrete boat ramp ran alongside the dock.

Dante took a moment to absorb the view. The water was crystal clear. Tall green plants grew underwater around the dock, swaying in the soft waves. A

school of a dozen tiny fish darted so close to the surface that Dante almost believed he could snatch one up. It turned out the camp was at the end of a small inlet and devoid of neighbors. He had to squint to see the nearest home, an indistinguishable square amidst distant trees.

Sparse, gangly clouds drifted overhead. Larger clouds on the horizon promised evening rain, but the weather was warm and gorgeous right now.

“It’s beautiful,” Dante said. He couldn’t think of any other way to describe it.

“Axel picked a winner. The day of the party’s supposed to have pristine weather. No clouds, no rain, no excessive wind. The dock is gonna be crawling with people wanting to take a dip. And thankfully, it doesn’t seem to be sinking.” Kevin walked down the length of the dock.

The underwater plantlife dwindled from view as the water grew deeper. At the end of the dock, Dante could only see blue. “Too bad we don’t have a speed boat. Or a party boat.”

“Just remember how many people would be sharing that one boat,” Kevin said. “And how much of a hassle getting it here would be. And they’re expensive as fuck to rent.”

“You considered it, didn’t you?” Dante asked.

“I *may* have suggested how memorable and impressive a boat would be, and how a picture of a boat racing across a lake flying a flag with the frat’s letters would help recruitment. And Axel *may* have linked me a spreadsheet showing how many parties and events we’d have to skip to afford it. Dude doesn’t miss the chance to smack you over the head with stats.” Kevin shook his head.

“It’s worth it having someone with foresight run the frat.” Dante had heard enough horror stories of frats on campus screwing up their finances so badly they lost their house. Rho Theta Rho’s house had originally belonged to just such a failed frat.

With the dock meeting their approval, Kevin and Dante headed for the cabins on the other side of the lodge.

The six cabins were utterly unremarkable at first sight, and a closer look didn’t reveal any hidden charm. They were identical, with rough wood plank walls and green tin roofs. Placards on the front doors gave each cabin a name related to a different kind of tree.

Kevin flipped through a set of keys. “Thank God they marked the keys.” He unlocked the door to the first cabin and flipped the light switch inside.

Light revealed little of note. The furnishings were all wooden and matched the walls, floor, and ceiling. Four simple bunk beds hugged the walls, eerily similar to the sort of bed Dante saw in the dorms at college. Two desks and chairs followed the rustic style that dominated the cabin furniture. A towering, two-

door wardrobe offered a pole to hang clothes from and nothing else. It lacked even a single shelf. A small, black plastic garbage can dared to break the theme of wall-to-wall wood.

“Honestly, I was expecting something fancier. Almost like glamping,” Dante said. “Fancy curtains, bright colors, scenic pictures on the walls. Maybe a minifridge.”

“People renting this place are looking for that ‘authentic’ summer camp feel,” Kevin said with air quotes. “I bet needing nothing more than plain sheets and a whole lot of wood saves the owners a shit-ton.”

“Probably. I hope our guests don’t mind roughing it.”

“The invitations made it clear to bring a sleeping bag if you plan on staying the night since bunks in the cabins are first come, first serve.” Kevin wrapped an arm around Dante’s shoulder and gave him a friendly shake. “Everything’s good. Axel and the party planning committee did all the worrying for you when they arranged all this. If something goes south, that’s for them to panic about and fix, not you.”

Kevin was right. Dante struggled with a habit of persistent worrying, his thoughts drifting to hypotheticals of what could go wrong. It mostly manifested in minor concerns about sleeping through alarms or engaging in risky behavior. A friend had once joked that he was born to be an OSHA inspector. He didn’t consider himself paranoid or pessimistic, just vigilant. But he needed to accept when things were out of his hands and not his responsibility to begin with, like vetting the party venue.

“Not my problem,” Dante affirmed, as much to himself as Kevin.

“Not your problem, not my problem. I kind of hope someone tries to make a fuss about the accommodations, though. Watching Axel furiously lecture them would be hilarious.” Kevin smirked, clearly imagining the scenario.

Kevin and Dante performed a brisk investigation of the cabin from one end to the other. Drawers and curtains were opened, then closed. Dante ran a hoof over the mattresses to check for suspicious wet spots—there were none, thankfully. Kevin jostled the bed frames and found all four to be solid. A bed collapsing in the night could be a disaster.

“One down, five more to go,” Kevin said as they left the first cabin.

“Aren’t you gonna lock it up?” Dante asked.

Kevin stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Nah. We’ve only got one key for each cabin, and I don’t want to have to dig them out any time someone needs to drop shit off or hang out or whatever. Less chance of them getting lost, too. Besides, it’s not like the wildlife can open doors.”

But a trespasser can. Dante kept the thought to himself, intent on worrying less. They were on a lake in the woods in the middle of nowhere. Thieves weren't going to wander in to steal anything. "Cool."

The remaining five cabins offered more of the same, giving Dante a sense of déjà vu whenever he entered. Four bunk beds, two desks, two chairs, a wardrobe, and a garbage can. No difference in position, condition, or color. They had less personality than a furniture store showroom. But the lack of surprise also carried over to the cleanliness of the cabins. Nothing was flimsy or broken. No horrible smells lurked within. Camp Ample Lake was living up to its website's promises.

"We're off to a fantastic start," Kevin said after the last cabin. "Just have the bathroom left."

The bathroom was closer to the lodge and at least twice the size of the cabins. It was split between a men's room and a women's room, with a handicap-accessible unisex room squeezed between.

Kevin unlocked the door to the men's room and cautiously entered. The bathroom was plain, various shades of white lit up in fluorescent yellow. But it was clean, cleaner than any campground bathroom Dante had been in. Sinks, urinals, and stalls were up front. Dryer stalls and showers were past them, their thin curtains pushed open.

Each dryer stall had a metal box on the wall with a long plastic tube attached. The style reminded him of a vacuum cleaner. "Damn, they don't have wall nozzle dryers, just the hose kind. That's gonna suck for people with thick fur." Wall nozzles dried from multiple directions, saving considerable time.

"Then it's a good thing we don't have thick fur," Kevin said. The elk slid past Dante. He grabbed the hose and pushed the large button on the wall next to it. The dryer roared to life, spewing warm air from the hose. "Eh, the air flow's strong enough." His sly smile returned, and he raised a brow at Dante. "This *does* remind me of some videos I've seen online of people puffing up with these. They're basically air pumps, after all."

Dante had pushed away thoughts of inflation after seeing the hose, but Kevin's comment brought them rushing back. Inflation was a pleasure that'd snuck up on the bull, steadily stoked by freshman pranks, drunken dares, and curiosity that'd become something a bit more sensual. He didn't hide that he liked inflating—he couldn't, really, not with how often he found an excuse to swell. Kevin was one of the few who knew the full extent of his desire to balloon, though.

"I think I've seen one or two videos like that." Videos Dante thought about whenever he happened to stumble across hose dryers.

"You ever tried it out yourself?"

“No,” Dante said and bit his lip.

“We can always change that.” Kevin stepped up to Dante. He slowly waved the hose in front of Dante’s face, grinning as the bull’s eyes followed its every move. Warm air gushed out.

“It’s probably not the best time for that.” Dante struggled to put any conviction into the words. He hadn’t inflated in nearly two weeks, and the temptation wore away at him. Had Kevin noticed?

“Not even a quick puff? Just a little sample of what it feels like to be filled with hot air.” Kevin held the hose closer.

Dante should’ve refused, but Kevin excelled at smooth-talking the bull into wanting to balloon. “Just a little. For now,” he swiftly added.

“Then open up, big guy.” Kevin waited for Dante to follow his order, then pushed the end of the hose into the bull’s open mouth.

Warmth puffed out Dante’s cheeks and surged into his stomach. A blissful tingle spread through his body as his belly started to swell. He tilted his head down to get a better look. As great as the experience felt, watching the change was one of his favorite parts. The undeniable proof he was growing larger.

Dante’s belly wasted no time expanding, bulging outward from warm air like dough in the oven. The heat whirling within him was new and strange. It first reminded him of sitting next to a fire, then standing in the sun on a clear summer day. It wasn’t exactly uncomfortable, just very different. He might have welcomed it more in cold weather.

The eager bull placed his hooves on his middle as his polo slowly rode up, revealing the curved strip of reddish brown. His belly took on the beach ball shape he adored, too perfectly round and taut to be natural. He tapped his fingers and felt the subtle reverberation through his warm body—*heard* the faint hollow drumming. The blow dryer really did serve well as an air pump.

If Dante stood there and let Kevin continue, he’d become spherical, no doubt. Just a giant ball of hot air. Hadn’t he seen someone float like that in a video once, as if they’d swelled with helium? Deep, deep down, he wished to inflate to his limit. He wanted Kevin to poke and roll him, to *feel* more balloon than bull. Balloons didn’t have to worry, not if they were with someone they trusted, and Dante trusted Kevin completely.

A campground bathroom wasn’t the nicest place to fully inflate, though, and the wall dryer couldn’t deflate him after the fun ended. As it was, Dante would need to squeeze the warm air out with his hooves, one push and belch at a time. So the bull restrained himself and pulled out the tube.

“Done so soon?” Kevin teased, returning the hose to its holder and letting the dryer cycle end. “I was expecting having to wiggle your round sides through the door.”

Dante blushed. Yet another delightful mental image he'd have swimming in his head all weekend. "I said I was only puffing up a little. To get a feel for it, that's all," he reminded Kevin. And himself. He'd pumped up more than that, though thankfully not by much.

"Even a little puff looks good on you." Kevin smacked Dante's bloated middle twice, producing a satisfying *thunk, thunk* sound. "We'll have to finish up later, then. I haven't gotten to see my favorite hunk of beef round in ages."

Dante privately noted it hadn't even been three weeks since Kevin had last fully inflated him. Summer jobs and internships got in the way. And the occasional lack of privacy. Both of them had roommates, and pumping up in the frat house quickly turned into a group event if another frat brother stumbled into them.

"Sounds good to me." Dante's voice cracked slightly as he eagerly replied.

"Perfect. There's one more place to check before we head to the lodge, but I need to grab something from the truck first." Kevin hip-checked Dante's round middle as he slid past him.

"Wait, could you help me deflate before we leave?"

Kevin looked over his shoulder, sporting a devious smile. "And get rid of the eye candy? Of course not!"

"Bastard!" Dante laughed at the compliment. Sometimes, he swore his friend would keep him permanently puffed up if he could, a balloon to play with and spoil whenever he pleased. The thought made Dante squirm more than he liked to admit. He crossed his arms over his belly and squeezed, forcing out the first burp of warm air.

Back at the trucks, Kevin retrieved a black, oblong duffle bag covered in pockets. Then he turned around and headed in the direction of the bathroom again.

"What's in the bag?" Dante asked, still deflating himself bit by bit. His loud belches echoed all over Camp Ample Lake, and he feared the rest of the guys would know for certain he'd inflated when he was supposed to be working.

"It's a surprise."

Dante looked at the bag again and the smug aura Kevin surrounded himself in. An air pump and a hose would fit in the bag. "When we talked about inflating later, I thought we meant *later, later*." Not that the idea didn't get his tail swaying.

Kevin let out a one-note laugh. "That's not what we're doing, though I'm glad to hear it's never far from your thoughts, balloon."

Dante puffed up his cheeks and exhaled, embarrassed by how easily the silly nickname got him. "Then what *are* we doing?"

"You'll see," Kevin said cryptically.

The pair walked past the bathroom and the cabins, then through a wide trail between trees. The trail ended at a clearing, where Dante guessed the old summer camp's recreation used to take place. There were horseshoe pits and two poles waiting for a volleyball net. But an archery range dominated the bulk of the clearing.

The range had a roofed shelter flanked by two small storage sheds. Classic round targets on wooden frames lined the end of the range.

Realization hit Dante as Kevin made his way to the archery range. "You didn't," the bull smirked.

"Of course I did! I decided to bring my gear the second I saw the pictures of the range online." Kevin set his bag on a shelf under the range shelter and opened it. The elk pulled out a slim quiver with arrows and carefully slid it onto his back. Then he lifted a wooden recurve bow and held it in the palms of his hooves like a treasure. He was as passionate about archery as Dante was about inflation and took every opportunity he could to display his skill.

Kevin notched an arrow and took precise aim at a target down the range. He slowly pulled back the bowstring, holding his pose for so long that Dante assumed it had less to do with aiming and more to do with showing off his arm strength. The elk craved being seen at his best.

When Kevin finally loosed the arrow, it raced to the target and embedded into it firmly, just outside the innermost circle. He nodded to himself, clearly satisfied with the shot. "I wish we had enough room at the frat house for a proper range like this. The small one I've got set up isn't a challenge."

And, Dante thought, the short distance means even his unskilled challengers get plenty of shots straight in the middle. Kevin couldn't stand out if his shots were indistinguishable from those of drunks. "Well, the majority of the guys favor pool and foosball. You can't blame the frat for focusing on those rather than archery."

Kevin shot another arrow. It landed in the same ring as the first. "Yeah, but some of those guys only got into pool and foosball *because* they had access to them at the frat. So maybe having a decent range would get them into archery."

"I know you're responsible with a bow and arrow, dude, but what about the others? How long do you think it'd take for someone to make a drunken bet they could shoot an arrow off someone's head? Or make shots while someone's blimped up behind the target? Or both?" An unfortunate victim might survive an arrow through the arm, but a balloon would be reduced to scraps no matter where the arrow pierced. Dante didn't like dwelling too much on the scenario, not when his brain defaulted to having an overconfident Kevin behind the bow.

Kevin scoffed and fired an arrow. “I’d like to think someone with half a brain and less booze in their system would stop anyone who tried to pull that shit, but I *have* seen idiots jump off the roof of a house on a whim. And I bet it’d only take one isolated accident for the university to overreact and take down the one range on campus.” He didn’t aim quite as long on the next shot and hit wide on the target. “Idiots have ruined enough for me as-is.”

Dante winced, hoping his friend wasn’t referring to the poor freshman who’d burst and led to Rho Theta Rho’s probation. “Which is why I’d prefer to see you using a bow and not—I don’t know—Berg.” Or half the frat, if he had to be honest. He liked the guys, but way too many of them were reckless. “That way no one pops.”

An arrow struck the center circle. Kevin did a little fist pump. “Yeah. I can’t have anyone bursting my favorite balloon, after all.” He prodded Dante’s puffy middle with his bow.

Dante’s muzzle twisted, and he forced out the last of the air in his stomach. He already missed the pleasant sensation of pressure. *Soon*, he promised himself. *Soon*, he’d fill up all the way and indulge in the blimpy fun he’d craved for weeks.