

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 013

By: Indigo Rho

The crack of a bat on TV got Berg dancing in his seat. Soda splashed within the bloated polar bear's belly, crashing like muffled waves. He belched mid-cheer, a thunderous, rumbling roar.

Dante watched Berg's middle swell a little more from the release of carbonation. The furry white ball filled the frat boy's lap to the point that he'd begun to push down on it to get a clearer view of the TV screen. Fizzing soda had filled him up nicely.

Rounding bellies usually distracted Dante from the world's woes, but—no matter how hard he tried—he simply couldn't draw much joy from Berg's bloating. His thoughts kept drifting to Webb.

"Acquaintance" was about the strongest word Dante could use to describe his relationship with Webb. They'd chatted a bit, here and there, about the things they enjoyed about inflation. On occasion, when Dante happened to be in the mood to get high and had joined Webb's stoner circle at parties, they'd even inflated together. Webb might not necessarily have been a friend, but he'd been a fixture in Dante's life at college. Having grown accustomed to seeing the goofy rabbit practically every day, he struggled to accept he was gone for good. The guy had made a single mistake, and now he was scraps.

Thinking of Webb inevitably got Dante thinking of Abel as well. The arctic wolf was someone who'd actually been close to Webb, and it didn't take much to notice the torment the guy was going through. Dante already regretted not standing his ground and sticking with Abel. It wasn't a good idea for Abel to be drunk and alone. He might hurt himself coming back in the dark.

Lights died, the TV flipped off, and the guys in the lodge were suddenly thrown into darkness. The small, neglected fire in the fireplace offered little more than a flickering glow that cast dim, orange light on everyone in the room.

"Bro, what the fuck!" Berg's bellowing curse rose above the confusion that followed.

Phones were pulled from pockets, and power-draining flashlight modes were turned on, marking everyone with a personal beam of light.

"Hey Berg! Blake! Where'd you guys stash the lanterns?" Dante asked.

"On the table by the door," Blake replied.

The light beams converged on the entry. Dante and the rest grabbed lanterns, allowing them to retire their phone flashlights. Light returned to the room, though shadows coated the far corners.

Berg's lantern lit up his scowl. "Of all the damn times for the power to go out—the game's not finished yet!" he seethed.

“We can always simulate the rest of our bet by having you chug a few more two-liters and calling it a day.” Blake slapped Berg’s gut, prompting it to swell again.

“The Baysox were up, bro! There’s still time for you to balloon.” A belch interrupted Berg’s glare.

Oscar stood in front of the door, with his puffy middle pressing against the surface and his round face against the glass of the little window. He pulled back with a wobble. “It’s pouring, but the storm doesn’t look bad enough to kill the power. Not a lightning bolt in sight.”

“There was thunder earlier,” Cody said.

“When?”

“I don’t know. A few minutes ago, I guess?” The leopard shrugged.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” Oscar said. Dante hadn’t heard it, either.

“Maybe because you were plowing through another bag of chips. I barely heard it over the sound of you chomping.”

Kevin cleared his throat, preventing a second argument from joining the one already in progress between Berg and Blake over baseball. “The storm’s probably bad elsewhere. In a place like this, all it’d take to kick us off the grid is high winds knocking down power lines a few miles away.”

That made sense to Dante. “Well, at least we’ve got plenty of light.” He held up his lantern.

“Screw the light, bro, I just want to see the game!” Berg groaned. “I can’t even follow the damn score on my phone since the signal’s still shit.”

Everyone compulsively checked their phones. No one’s signal had improved, leaving them as cut off from the outside world as they had been when they’d first arrived.

“You’ll have your damn game back soon enough, Berg, so stop whining,” Kevin said. It hadn’t taken the elk long to revert to authority mode. “Camp Ample Lake’s got a backup generator.”

Cody looked around at the dark room. “It’s doing a fantastic job.”

“Cut the snark. It has to be turned on first.” Kevin rolled his eyes. “We’ll have electricity again once we’ve done that. Really, this is all just a minor inconvenience.”

“Uh, how long do you think the generator’s gonna last?” Oscar asked. “There’s no telling how long it’ll take to repair the power lines, and there’s a lot here to power: lights, TV, fridges, freezers, water heaters.”

Kevin raised his hooves to silence the fox. “One step at a time. We’ll get the lights back on, and then we’ll have someone head up to the road and catch a signal to the outside world. I’m sure we can get updates on the situation then.”

He didn't bring up the other thing they'd have to attend to, which lay heavy on everyone's minds. They'd have to call the authorities about Webb. The lack of signal had given them a flimsy excuse to avoid reporting the serious accident that'd occurred at the camp. They couldn't hold off on that forever, not without bringing down a whole load of suspicion upon them. As it was, they were looking at a lot of uncomfortable questioning from the cops, and no one wanted to endure an interrogation from the volatile Sheriff Sutton.

"I can get the generator running," Blake volunteered. "I've worked with them a bit, so starting it up shouldn't be a problem. That'll give Berg time to stockpile more two-liters before the game comes back on." The crowd reacted too late to avoid a barrage of vengeful belly smacks from Berg that bloated him some.

"Thanks," Kevin said. He eyed up Blake's fizzing gut as he dug out the key to the generator shed and handed it over. "Shouldn't you deflate before you head out?" He spoke with a hint of force that implied it was more of a command than a suggestion.

"Nah," Blake said, either ignoring Kevin's subtle order or completely overlooking it. "A balloon belly won't get in my way." He thumped his middle a few times. "Besides, I'd lose the bet if I did *and* waste a bunch of precious soda at the same time."

"Sure." Kevin didn't hide his disappointment, but he didn't push the matter, either. He seemed to understand that Blake being puffy wasn't worth a lecture and an argument that could delay getting the electricity back.

"Shit," Dante cursed under his breath. The power outage had briefly made him forget about Abel. "If the power's out here, then it's out in the mess hall as well, and I don't think Abel took a lantern with him when he went."

Kevin furrowed his brows. "When did he leave?"

"Uh, not that long ago?" Too much of the evening was becoming a blur to Dante. "I went to the kitchen to talk with him, and he said he was going to get a drink at the mess hall."

"Great. Just great. He'll make a mess stumbling around that place drunk in the dark." Kevin rubbed his temples and sighed.

"He's probably already passed out drunk, then. I'm sure he's fine," Cody said.

"That'd be worse. If anyone's going to be passed out, they should be passed out here at the lodge," Kevin insisted.

Because having the guys scattered around the camp wouldn't be a good look if the cops came by to investigate Webb's accident. The fact that Oscar, Berg, and Blake were still fairly bloated would complicate things as well. First responders might assume it was a dare gone wrong, and Berg and Blake's soda bet wouldn't help.

“I’ll take an extra lantern and check on him,” Dante said. It was something he should’ve done far earlier, but better late than never. “He might hurt himself if he’s not passed out and tries to wander back in the dark.” He thought of all the exposed roots between the mess hall and the lodge. Plenty of mud, too. After the loss of Webb, the last thing the group needed was someone getting injured, serious or otherwise.

“I’m going with you,” Kevin said. “If he’s out cold or wasted, you’ll need someone to help drag him back. And if he’s conscious and acting stubborn, then you’ll need me to knock sense into him.”

Dante hoped he didn’t mean that literally, but he appreciated the assistance nonetheless. He hadn’t exactly asserted himself in his last conversation with Abel, and the wolf being drunk wouldn’t improve his odds at a second round. “Thank you. I’m sure Abel won’t make a fuss about it.” It’d make his life a lot easier if he didn’t.

Darkness and heavy rain welcomed Dante, Kevin, and Blake outside. They stood on the covered porch and watched the rain coming down, no longer eager to get moving. Dante wished he’d brought a jacket. He hadn’t expected to be outside when the rain came.

“Huh, guess we’re not the only ones on the lake with a generator.” Blake pointed, guiding Dante and Kevin’s eyes to pinpricks of light in the distance.

“If you’re rich enough to live on a lake, you’re rich enough never to have to worry about power outages,” Kevin snorted. He turned to Blake and patted the bloated crow on the back. “Good luck getting ours running.”

“Sure, sure.” Blake inhaled, then exhaled, before wobbling out into the night at a brisk pace for someone with a swollen middle.

“No point in delaying. Not like the rain’s gonna clear up anytime soon.” Despite insisting on coming along, Kevin didn’t look enthused about getting drenched.

The pair reluctantly left shelter and headed towards the mess hall. With the power out and dark clouds covering the sky, the mess hall had become a shadowy outline. Dante curbed his urge to run, knowing it’d be a recipe for disaster. Getting wet sucked, but tripping on a root and slamming face-first into the mud was a whole lot worse. He didn’t even want to think about how hard it’d be for an ambulance to get down the winding road to the camp if he messed himself up.

The short trip to the mess hall drenched Dante and Kevin. Raindrops dripped from their antlers and horns, persisting no matter how hard they shook.

Kevin flicked the nearest light switch a few times. “Guess that confirms it wasn’t just the power at the lodge that went out. I mean, I didn’t *think* that was the case, but it’s good to think of every scenario when shit goes down.”

The elk's attempt to appear in complete control of the situation amused Dante. Even away from the others, Kevin couldn't help but assert his confidence.

"Now we just gotta make sure Abel's alright."

The main room bore no sign of Abel. Rain drummed on the roof above, gently rattling the long windows. Aside from that, it was quiet.

"Abel! Where you at!" Kevin shouted.

Silence. No growled response to go away echoed from the back.

"Maybe he really did pass out," Dante sighed. Carrying Abel back to the lodge would be a challenge, even with Kevin's help. He readied himself to be soaked through by the time they returned.

"Abel, we've got a lantern for you! Blake's working on the generator, but I'm not sure if it's hooked up to the mess hall! C'mon, dude, sitting alone in the dark can't be fun!"

Dante winced. "Do you really have to yell that loud?"

"It might wake him if he's passed out. Or annoy him so much he curses me out, just in case he's pretending not to hear us." Kevin smirked.

Lantern light swept the room but turned up no wolf. At the very least, Abel hadn't gone on a bender and collapsed on the floor. But the kitchen still needed checking, and that's where the liquor was stored.

A mess awaited Dante and Kevin in the kitchen. Empty bags of marshmallows surrounded a fallen chair that'd been dragged into the room. Fluffy white marshmallows littered the floor, as if someone had torn open a few bags and tossed the contents around.

"Jesus Christ." Kevin frowned at the pile of debris. "Did the fucker *really* plow through our whole stockpile of marshmallows?"

Dante noticed the hint of awe hiding among the anger in the elk's voice. "Watch out. There's broken glass on the floor near the counters." It didn't look like Abel had hit the beer quite as intensely as he had the snacks, though. "What the hell happened here?"

"Abel decided to eat himself into a food coma, obviously." Kevin swung his lantern in an arc, shooting dirty looks in all directions. "Fucking hell. This is the sort of shit I'd expect from Oscar, not him."

"Then where'd he go?" Dante glanced at the beer and the bags and tried imagining just how stuffed Abel would be after consuming it all. Maybe as round as Berg currently was? That was a lot of belly to hide.

"The cabins. Bathroom. Wherever he thinks he can hide his shame after pulling a stunt like this. Christ." Kevin covered his eyes with a hoof and took a deep breath. "He better not be puking his guts out somewhere."

There wasn't necessarily anything wrong with Kevin's hypothesis. Abel was distressed and emotional, so it was believable that he'd go on an eating binge.

But the more Dante saw, the stronger he felt something wasn't right. "This is extreme, though. Even for Abel." Dante's lantern hovered over the chair. "Is that rope?"

Kevin kneeled and picked up a strand half-covered by a marshmallow bag. Both ends were frayed. "It's been cut."

"Why are there pieces of cut rope in here, Kevin? Why is there rope in here at all?" The mess felt less and less like a mere depression binge by the second. Dante found his heart pumping and his eyes darting around. He'd have given anything to spot the swollen curve of Abel's belly jutting out from behind a counter, the wolf engorged but safe. But all he saw was the unnerving clutter.

"I don't know!" Kevin snapped and threw the scrap of rope to the floor. "It might've been here the entire time. It's not like the guys would fess up to finding a small mess. They'd assume I'd want them to clean it right away, and they'd be right." The elk's fist was clenched tight and shaking.

Dante looked away from Kevin, which was why his light ended up shining upon the most suspicious thing in the room: the container of Webb's scraps. "Kevin," Dante said as he approached the container to confirm it was what he thought it was. "Abel took Webb's scraps with him when he left. I don't care how drunk or stuffed he is, there's no way he'd abandon Webb here."

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As soothing as the sound of the rain drumming on Blake's taut belly was, the crow still wished he'd brought an umbrella. A big, broad golf umbrella sat in the closet of his room at the frat house, taunting him for leaving it behind. He knew for a fact it'd protect him from the rain, even while bloated. Though it wouldn't do much to save him from the puddles he kept stepping in. The lantern helped, but it couldn't shed light on the ground hidden beneath his round gut.

Blake raised his lantern and scanned his surroundings again. He'd forgotten that the hardest part about dealing with the backup generator wasn't getting it on; it was actually finding the damn thing. He'd seen the shed it was in earlier, when the sun was still up and the rain had yet to come, but that seemed ages ago now. Darkness masked the few landmarks he remembered, and he feared he'd waddle right past the shed.

Sure enough, the disoriented crow overshot the generator shed by a mile, finding the bathroom cabin instead. He hadn't been there since finding out Webb had popped, and had planned to avoid it for the rest of the stay; the place made him uncomfortable. But the longer he stayed outside, the wetter he got, and feathers were a pain to dry. He begrudgingly took shelter inside to get out of the rain and rethink his approach.

The light of Blake's lantern reflected off the mirrors and white tiles of the bathroom. Deflating crossed his mind, leaving as swiftly as it'd arrived. Purging the soda would take forever and make him woozy. To top it all off, Berg was guaranteed to declare himself the winner of the bet if he deflated so much as an inch. The gloating would be unbearable.

Blake idly flipped the bathroom light switches as he created a mental map of the camp, confirming the electricity was out all over. Shame. A tripped circuit breaker would've made his job easier, as long as none of the fuses had blown.

After a few minutes of thinking with nothing to keep him company but the sound of the rain on the roof and the water dripping off his body and onto the floor, Blake was sort of certain he'd figured out where the generator shed was.

The crow left the safety of the bathroom cabin and ventured out into the rain once more. He still had to backtrack twice before finding the shed. To the crow's surprise, the shed door wasn't locked.

Kevin must have unlocked it while checking on everything earlier, Blake thought as he pushed his way inside.

The shed kept out the rain but didn't offer much in the way of room. Blake's modestly inflated belly filled up most of the open space. Taking a step in any direction caused him to bump into shelves, walls, or the generator itself. Filling up so much of the shed despite barely being inflated made the crow blush.

Once Blake managed to position himself, he was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the generator. He'd honestly expected it to be a rusting, gasoline-powered hunk of junk leftover from the summer camp days. Instead, it was a sleek, gray-white box presumably powered by propane.

Blake searched the surface of the generator for a switch and flicked it the second he found it.

Nothing happened.

The generator didn't whir or groan or hiss to life. No lights came on, and the thing didn't rumble. He tried a couple more times without success.

"Alright, big guy, what's wrong with you?" Blake sighed. Just because he was familiar with generators didn't mean he wanted to troubleshoot one by lantern light in a rainstorm with a bloated belly. He took a tiny bit of solace from the fact that he had shelter from the rain, at least.

Opening the side panel revealed a full propane tank properly hooked into place. All the nozzles were turned the right way, and he didn't smell gas. He shut the panel, running out of easy solutions. He loathed the idea of returning to the lodge with news of a busted generator. Berg would accuse him of sabotaging the bet, while Kevin might claim he slacked off.

Blake crouched down and kept his swollen gut at bay with a talon as he shuffled along the base of the generator in search of trouble. He couldn't quite

hold off the sloshing and belching, and swore he grew an inch or two rounder. No sense of triumph came from finally finding the answer to the problem; the wires connecting the generator to the camp's power grid were cut. They weren't frayed, either, as if an animal had gotten to them. The cuts were clean. Nothing else in the shed or on the generator had been messed with. Someone had simply cut the wires to ensure the generator wouldn't work when needed most.

Worry soaked into Blake like water into his feathers. The little generator shed suddenly didn't seem safe anymore.