

The Ample Lake Burster: Chapter 011

By: Indigo Rho

Time had run away from Oscar. Taut and round, the balloon of a fox had no way of checking his phone or even tracking the sun as it wandered toward the horizon. He felt as if ages had passed since Abel had puffed him up with his preposterous lung power. The wolf could be a living air pump when the mood struck. Oscar only wished Abel had focused all that huffing and puffing on someone like Cody.

The vengeful leopard had grown bored of floating on Oscar a while ago, but of course the feline reign of terror hadn't ended. Cody had found some rope and tied Oscar to the dock by his tail, "In case he needed to take his creaking boat onto the water later." And any time Oscar demanded to be deflated, Cody had pulled him in and barraged him with stiff pokes that got his hide groaning and his head spinning.

Just thinking about the treatment made Oscar blush so hard he swore his temperature rose a few degrees. Deep down, he truly enjoyed the rather aggressive teasing. The fox scowled, pinching his swollen cheeks. It was all so frustrating, but being the center of attention was sort of nice, and being fully inflated made you impossible to ignore. The pressure wasn't all that bad, either, once you got over the disorienting sensation of being as wide as you were tall. And being big and round made Oscar feel funny in ways he preferred to keep secret.

Unfortunately, Oscar was certain that Cody suspected all the joys he got from inflating. The leopard simply excelled too greatly at pushing his many buttons. At least Cody hadn't decided to share them with the rest of the frat. Not yet, anyway. If that were to happen, Oscar worried his frat brothers would conspire to keep him spherical as often as possible, regardless of his opinions on the matter.

Or perhaps Oscar was merely letting his imagination run rampant again. Cody had taunted him so often about becoming a permanent balloon that it'd begun to invade not only his dreams but also his idle thoughts. Such a thing would never happen, of course. None of the guys in the frat were keen on getting charged with false imprisonment over a prank. But there was no harm in imagining impossible scenarios.

Something cold tickled Oscar's taut middle. A second later, he felt the same tickle on one of his cheeks and realized it was water. No one had splashed him, though, which could only mean one thing: rain. Tiny, sporadic raindrops landed on opposite sides of the bloated fox, reminding him just how wide he'd grown by inflating.

Oscar wobbled as best he could, creaking up a storm. “Guys, it’s starting to rain!”

A drawn-out sigh came from the dock, where Cody had sprawled out to sun himself. “So much for the nice weather. Guess it couldn’t last forever.” The leopard stood and stretched. Then he started to walk away.

“Aren’t you forgetting something!” Oscar shouted at his friend.

Cody stopped and looked over his shoulder. “Nope. All my stuff’s on shore. I wasn’t gonna risk any of it getting accidentally kicked into the water.”

“I mean me, your best friend in the whole world!” Oscar instinctively attempted to put his paws on his hips but only managed to squeeze his blimpy body in the process.

Cody shrugged, a wide grin curling on his face. “Floaties are meant for the water. I don’t see any reason to bring an overinflated one like you in. How would we fit you through the doors?”

Oscar wobbled furiously in protest. “But it’s raining! If you abandon me out here, I’m bound to catch a horrible cold.” Like that time he’d passed out from a food coma at a frat BBQ the night a cold front moved in. Not even his thick coat of fur—and thicker layers of blubber—could keep the fox’s teeth from chattering when he finally woke up.

“I’ll make sure to find you some tissue,” Cody replied.

“Ah, so you *will* nurse me back to health, then? I hope you’re ready for such an important task because I’ll need a lot more than a few tissues to recover. You of all people should know how much soup a fox with as hearty a constitution as me will require if I’m bedridden with the sniffles. You better be ready for a workout ferrying those bowls back and forth!” Oscar tried not to think too hard about the time he’d guzzled *all* of the soup at a buffet on a dare last year. The warmth had left him feeling like a waddling cauldron as he dabbed his brow with a napkin. The dirty looks the staff had given him as he was squeezed through the exit were rather embarrassing as well.

Cody gulped. “Fine. I *guess* we can store you inside for now.”

The leopard trudged back and untied Oscar’s rope from the dock. He led Oscar to shore, tugging far harder on Oscar’s tail than necessary. Oscar yipped and yelped, but he reminded himself a bit of rough play was worth it if he at least ended up indoors before the drizzle became a downpour.

At long last, Oscar found himself on dry land again. But he was still a blimp, and few doors at the camp were wide enough to roll him through. He’d have to convince his friends to deflate him rather than keep him as a sassy outdoor air mattress. “Cody, buddy. Would you mind grabbing a pump so I can deflate? I swear it’s the last thing I’ll ask you to do tonight!”

Cody didn't answer right away, sending Oscar's hopes for mobility plummeting.

A shadow fell upon Oscar, not from a cloud moving over the sun but from Abel moving into view. The big arctic wolf loomed over him, sporting a toothy grin that offered nothing but menace.

"I'll gladly deflate you, bro," Abel threatened. The wolf's tail wagged a mile a minute, and Oscar doubted it was due to his desire to be a good Samaritan. He stiffly patted Oscar's bloated side.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

Oscar bit his lip. "Th-Thank you, Abel. I'm sure there's a pump back at the lodge. You can even roll me over there so you don't have to make a trip there and back."

Abel shook his head. "Why waste time grabbing a pump when I've got these." He flexed his thick arms, jiggling his belly a bit as well.

Oscar's ears flattened. He hoped his blimpy face disguised how hard he was blushing. Mischievous wolves had a hold on him he'd never break free of. "I'm grateful you're ready to help little old me, but I'd hate to stick you with such exhausting work! Cody can get that pump in the blink of an eye, can't you, Cody?"

"I don't know. Sounds like a lot of work to me, blimp," Cody snickered.

"It's a lot less work than squeezing the air out of me!"

"But not half as fun," Abel said. He nodded his head at Cody. "Take the other side, dude. We'll deflate him just like we would a beach ball."

Oscar shouldn't have liked any of the words coming out of Abel's mouth, but a rebellious voice in the back of his head welcomed getting manhandled by the big bad wolf and his spotted minion. Abel's meaty paws pressed against one of Oscar's sides, followed by Cody's needling claws on the other. He waved his puffy paws at the pair in a futile attempt to shoo them off. His display earned him nothing but chuckles.

"Alright, Cody. We'll squeeze the air from this pesky balloon on the count of three," Abel said. "One."

"I still think a pump would work better," Oscar yipped.

"Two."

"What if your claws dig in too deep?"

"Three!"

Two pairs of paws pushed hard into Oscar's sides, causing the swollen fox's equator to bulge faintly. His eyes shot wide open, then closed halfway as a pressure daze sent him through a loop. Air gushed from his snout, hissing like a balloon that'd sprung a leak.

The pressure eased when Abel and Cody pulled their paws back, though it took Oscar a moment to collect himself. “Too hard,” he squeaked. “Definitely gotta get the pump.”

“Once again, Cody! One. Two. Three!”

Eager paws drove Oscar right back into the daze. The helpless fox balloon rocked back and forth, barely cognizant of why he was squirming. More air rushed out as he became slightly less spherical.

“P-Pump,” Oscar mumbled, left as speechless by embarrassment as by pressure.

The paws of Oscar’s frat brothers meandered as they squeezed him over and over again, teasing the flustered fox’s hide. They snuck in pokes and tickles, gropes and slaps. Oscar thumped like a drum between squeezes, wobbling left and right. The pressure dazes gradually diminished, but his blushing never did. What few words he managed were promptly ignored.

As Oscar slowly regained his shape, Abel and Cody escalated from pushing at him to leaning against him. Cody even had the audacity to hurl himself atop Oscar’s balloon belly. The cat howled in surprise as he bounced right off and fell face-first onto the ground. He didn’t test his luck any further after that, though he prodded Oscar harder in vengeance.

Oscar flailed more and more as his mobility returned to him, if only to dissuade his frat brothers from believing he enjoyed their treatment. When his arms and legs were no longer stiff and puffy, he finally managed to roll himself onto his feet. The fox was far from fully deflated—his belly jutted out like a big balloon, making him comically rotund—but he needed to be free before he became an obvious blushy mess.

“You’ve still got a lot of air in there, balloon.” Abel smacked Oscar’s bloated middle, making the fox wobble. “Won’t take long for me to squeeze the rest out, promise.”

Oscar didn’t like the mischievously handsome grin on Abel’s face—or the triumphant smug grin on Cody’s. Another squeeze would be the end of him, at least in regard to his dignity. “I’m fine!” he insisted in a flustered huff. “I need to dry off before I get soaked again by the rain. I’ll deflate later.” With a pump that wouldn’t tease him, poke him, or get him babbling embarrassing things afterward.

“Suit yourself, bro.” Abel flicked Oscar’s middle with a finger, producing a *thump* that reverberated throughout the fox’s body. Even while mostly returned to normal, Oscar still felt like a balloon.

Oscar didn’t give Abel a chance to change his mind. While Cody snickered his spots off, Oscar snatched his stuff off the ground and wobbled at a brisk pace towards the bathroom cabin. The out-of-the-way bathroom would allow him to

test whether he'd deflated enough to squeeze through doorways. The last thing he needed was to get wedged in the lodge's only entrance, with all the other frat boys as witnesses. There'd be pictures for sure, and videos, too. Just the thought got him blushing full blast again. Idly tapping his round middle certainly didn't help.

"Cody thinks he's gotten the better of me, but I've only just begun," Oscar swore under his breath. He'd have to escalate their complicated prank war appropriately to prevent the leopard from gloating for days. Inflating Cody and leaving him blimped up overnight was the obvious answer. Simple and relatively harmless, while effectively torpedoing Cody's ego. And if the rest of the guys teased the cat into enough of a blustery rage, he might even forget who pumped him up in the first place.

The drizzle was picking up. Oscar picked up his pace a little, not that the hefty, bloated fox could move all that fast.

Oscar could also risk waiting until the party in order to maximize Cody's embarrassment. Rolling the cat balloon around the camp and getting total strangers to wobble and pat him sounded just plain delightful. The only problem would be if the guests hijacked Cody for their own fun, or if the bustle of the party prevented Oscar from cornering his inflatable prey.

Friendly revenge was challenging work.

The bathroom cabin managed to impress Oscar at first sight, which was an unexpected surprise. There wasn't a single sign of peeling paint or questionable dips in the roof. And low and behold, the interior was clean as well, aside from leaves that'd blown in at some point.

As Oscar padded towards the dryer stalls, he saw more and more leaves on the floor. But the longer he stared at them, the odder they looked to him. Like they weren't leaves at all. The colors and shapes weren't quite right. Some of them had folded like fabric. And did they look a little fuzzy?

Oscar stopped. His chest felt tight, and his heart beat faster. Something was very wrong in the bathroom, something he desperately didn't want to think about. The fox gulped and kneeled to get a closer look. He poked one of the "leaves" with a shaking finger, and jolted back when he felt fur. It was a scrap of hide. *All* of the mysterious litter on the ground were hide scraps, and their colors were hauntingly familiar. They reminded Oscar of Webb.

"It's just a joke. A really, really bad joke," Oscar gulped. His eyes darted all over the bathroom, desperately seeking someone waiting to jump out and laugh at how easily he'd been tricked. But he didn't see any of the guys. All he saw was Webb's towel and clothes sitting in one of the dryer stalls, along with a glimmer from the amethyst necklace the rabbit always wore. Its chain appeared snapped. The stall's dryer hose hung loose.

There were too many scraps, and they all looked too real to be fabric fakes. Webb would never fake his own explosion for laughs. It was one thing to joke about popping, but to try and convince others you actually *had* popped? No. None of the guys were dumb enough to do that.

Oscar didn't think; he simply fled. He barreled out of the bathroom cabin, too terrified to worry about tripping or getting a cramp. His inflated belly wobbled up and down wildly, threatening to topple him if he made a single slip-up. By some miracle, the bloated fox reached the lodge without falling.

Oscar practically bounced off the front door when he arrived. He frantically scrambled with the knob before he got it open and stomped inside. The fox's calves burned from his uncharacteristic sprint, and he struggled to speak as he gasped for air. He wanted to collapse.

Cody and Abel had already returned to the lodge. They gave Oscar strange looks after his loud arrival. Berg and Blake sat on the couch, both bloated and looking over their shoulders.

"What the hell's gotten into you?" Cody asked.

"Webb!" Oscar croaked. He was getting lightheaded and couldn't get enough air.

"Webb ain't here," Abel said. "If you need him that badly, I'm about to track him down. Gotta make sure he didn't decide to hike through the woods high or something."

Oscar wished that was the case. A missing Webb was better than the truth. "I found...I found Webb. Bathroom cabin. His stuff was on the floor. And the...the. I thought they were leaves...but they were scraps. Webb, he...he popped."

Abel's eyes widened. He bolted past Oscar and out the door without saying a word.

"You're joking, right?" Cody crossed his arms tight. The leopard's tail flicked behind him. Berg and Blake lugged themselves off the couch. Berg was almost as bloated as Oscar, though his belly sloshed audibly.

Oscar shook his head as he fought to catch his breath. "It's real." And it was a nightmare.

"Shit!" Cody hissed before sprinting after Abel. Berg and Blake weren't far behind him, both frat boys holding their swollen bellies to reduce the sloshing.

Oscar allowed himself a moment of rest before he went after them. He didn't want to see the scattered hide scraps again. Not while he still clearly heard Webb's voice in his head from mere hours before, giggling while rambling on about ghosts. The scraps proved the rabbit was gone. Maybe the whole thing would turn out to be a bad dream if he avoided them.

Suffering the consequences of his earlier flight, Oscar took much longer to return to the bathroom. He dragged himself along, one aching foot after the other. He vaguely noticed Kevin and Dante heading in his direction. They must have seen the other guys rushing and realized something wasn't right.

"What happened?" Kevin asked sternly as they arrived at the bathroom cabin.

Oscar opened his mouth to tell him, but he couldn't say the words. He'd barely been able to say them back at the lodge. *Webb popped*. Thinking about it made him shudder, which confused Kevin and Dante further.

"Fucking hell," Cody muttered from within the bathroom, drawing in the rest of the frat boys.

Abel crouched on the floor, holding a larger piece of hide scrap in his paws. He stared down at it, unblinking. His paws shook faintly.

Dante's jaw dropped at the sight of the hide scraps. Kevin's ears went limp, and visible unease poured from the elk. "What. Happened," Kevin repeated himself with a shaky voice.

No one said anything. Eyes looked away from multitudes of scraps.

Oscar dug up the courage to answer. "Webb popped."

"This better not be a joke." Kevin glared daggers at Oscar.

"I'd never joke about something like this!" Oscar snapped back.

Dante placed a hoof on Kevin's shoulder. "Kevin."

Kevin swatted him away, still focused on Oscar. "How?"

"I don't know. I just...I just found him like this." Oscar waved at the scraps and winced.

"Wasn't he with you all?" Kevin demanded.

"For a while, yeah. But he left early and didn't come back. I just thought he'd gone to the lodge." *Or somewhere to smoke*. Any time Oscar couldn't see Webb, he assumed the rabbit was taking a hit. "Then I came here to dry off and found...found." He didn't want to say the word anymore.

"No one spontaneously pops," Kevin said. All Oscar could think about was how Webb had droned on about supernatural spontaneous bloating while floating on the lake. "How did he go from swimming at the lake to *this*?" More vague words to describe the unfortunate fate none of them were handling well.

"Webb wasn't swimming; he was floating," Cody piped up. "He had Abel pump him up, and he didn't fully deflate before he wandered off—after vaping, by the way. Wanna bet Webb saw the dryer hose, decided to blimp up more, and then lost control?"

It was a distressingly valid theory.

"Webb would never fuck up that badly." Abel snapped out of his daze.

“But Webb likes to inflate, probably more than anyone else here,” Kevin said. A few eyes drifted to Dante, Oscar’s included.

Abel stood, still clutching the hide scrap. “So?”

“It also sounds like he spent most of his time here inflated. Berg and Blake said Webb pumped himself up with a bellows for fun while they were supposed to check on the lodge. Right guys?” Berg and Blake nodded, avoiding eye contact with Abel. “And he inflated at the lake, too. If he *was* high and craving inflation, then maybe he screwed up. It wouldn’t be the first time he did something dumb while high.”

“He’s never done anything this dumb!” Abel growled and bared his fangs.

“What about that time Webb bounced himself down a flight of stairs because he was convinced being inflated would cushion his fall?” Oscar mumbled. The guys laughed about it a lot, Webb included. Everyone regretted not having it on video, and they’d had to sternly dissuade Webb from repeating the stunt for posterity. “He was kind of right, though the paramedics were still called over to check on him.”

“And Webb nearly set the frat house on fire on the 4th of July while stoned,” Cody added. The leopard swiftly stepped behind Oscar so the swollen fox stood between him and Abel.

Abel sneered at the pair. “He’s made mistakes before, but he’d never be stupid enough to blow himself up!” The wolf took two steps toward Cody’s rotund hiding place before Kevin swooped in front of him.

“Dude! It’s fucked up, but sometimes accidents happen. Every one of us has seen someone pop at a party because they lost control or got reckless. Shit happens, even to people we never thought it’d happen to.” Kevin stood straight with arms out, making himself look large before the hefty wolf.

“But—”

“This isn’t the time to debate what happened! Not while Webb’s still...still scattered about. We need to collect him,” Kevin said.

Abel deflated, and his eyes dulled. “Yeah.” He spoke quietly and rubbed his brow with a quivering paw. “Yeah.”

“Cody,” Kevin barked at the cat. Oscar heard Cody jolt to attention behind him. “Grab a container. Something clean and big enough to fit all that’s left.”

“Sure.” Cody jogged off with none of his usual snark. Webb’s bursting had shaken all of them.

“Everyone else, start gathering the scraps.”

The frat boys did as they were told without hesitation or complaint. No one spoke. The only noises in the bathroom were footsteps, stifled grunts, and the gentle sloshing of Berg and Blake’s soda-filled bellies.

Oscar carefully plucked scraps of Webb's hide off the ground as if they might disintegrate in his paws if he moved too fast. Time passed slower than when he'd been inflated on the lake, a simpler moment he wished had never ended. If only Webb had stayed with them till the rain had come.

Cody returned with a bin, which the guys solemnly placed the numerous scraps into. Abel added the amethyst pendant to the top of the pile before closing the lid. He held the container close. The wolf didn't look at anyone or anything in particular, too distant for the rest of them to reach.

Webb's bursting had cast a dark and heavy shadow on the camp. The excitement of the adventure was gone. Webb was gone. Outside, the rain picked up, having finally arrived in force. But Oscar didn't think of how he might get soaked on the way back to the lodge. It was hard for the stunned fox to think of anything at all.